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NFL DRAFT REPORT

Sports Illustrated

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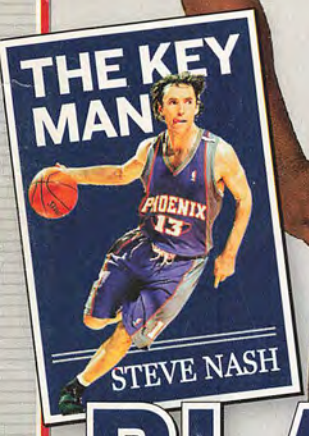

NBA PLAYOFF PREVIEW

CAN THE SUNS KEEP SHINING?

CAN THE HEAT BE BEAT?

THE FASTEST GROWING SPORT IN AMERICA P. 58

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APRIL 25, 2005 www.SI.com | AOL Keyword: Sports Illustrated

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Sports Illustrated
APRIL 25, 2005
VOLUME 102, NO. 17

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARRY GOSSAGE/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (STOUDEMIRE) AND VICTOR BALDIZON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (O'NEAL)
INSET PHOTOS: John W. McDonough (Nash); David Bergman (Lacrosse)

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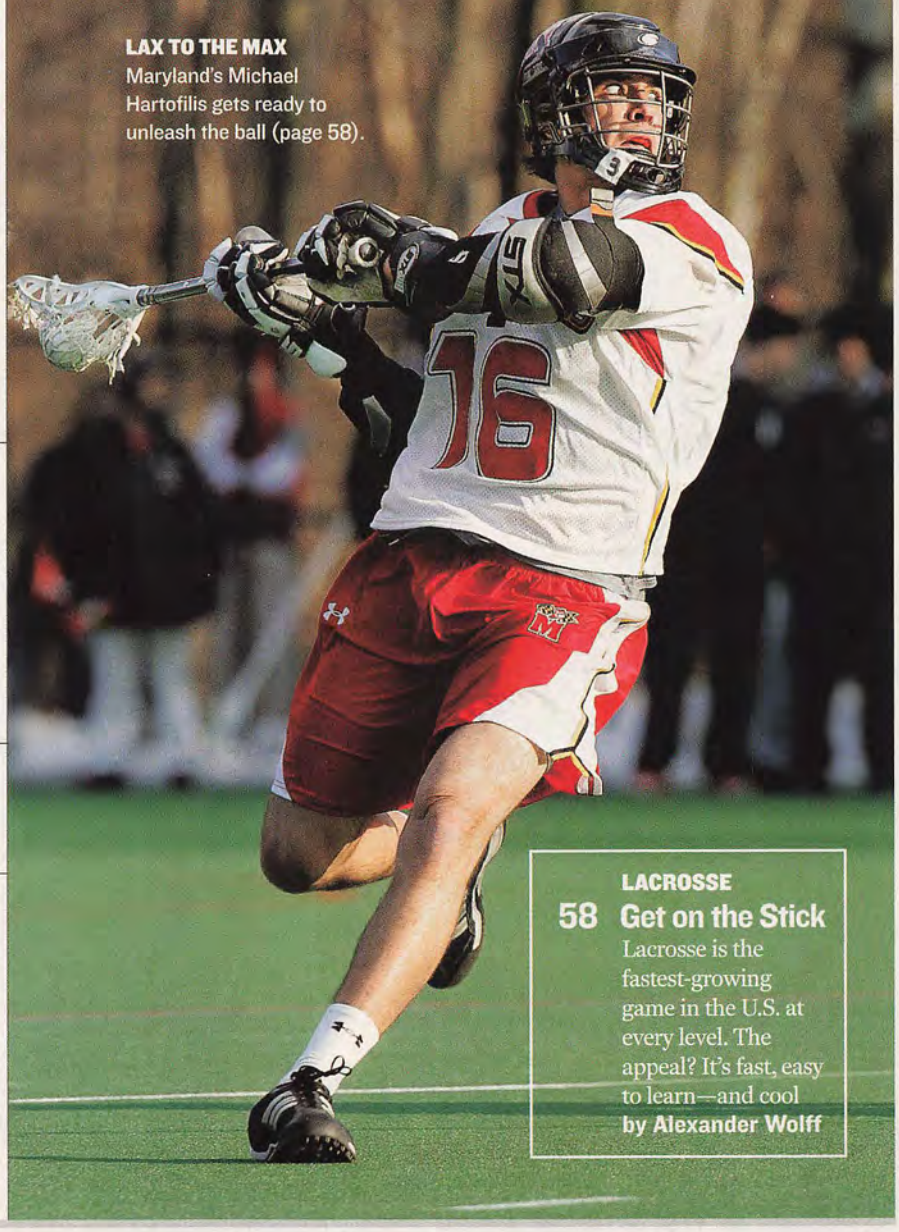

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Lacrosse is the fastest-growing game in the U.S. at every level. The appeal? It's fast, easy to learn—and cool
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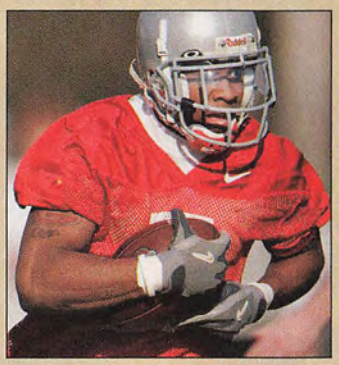


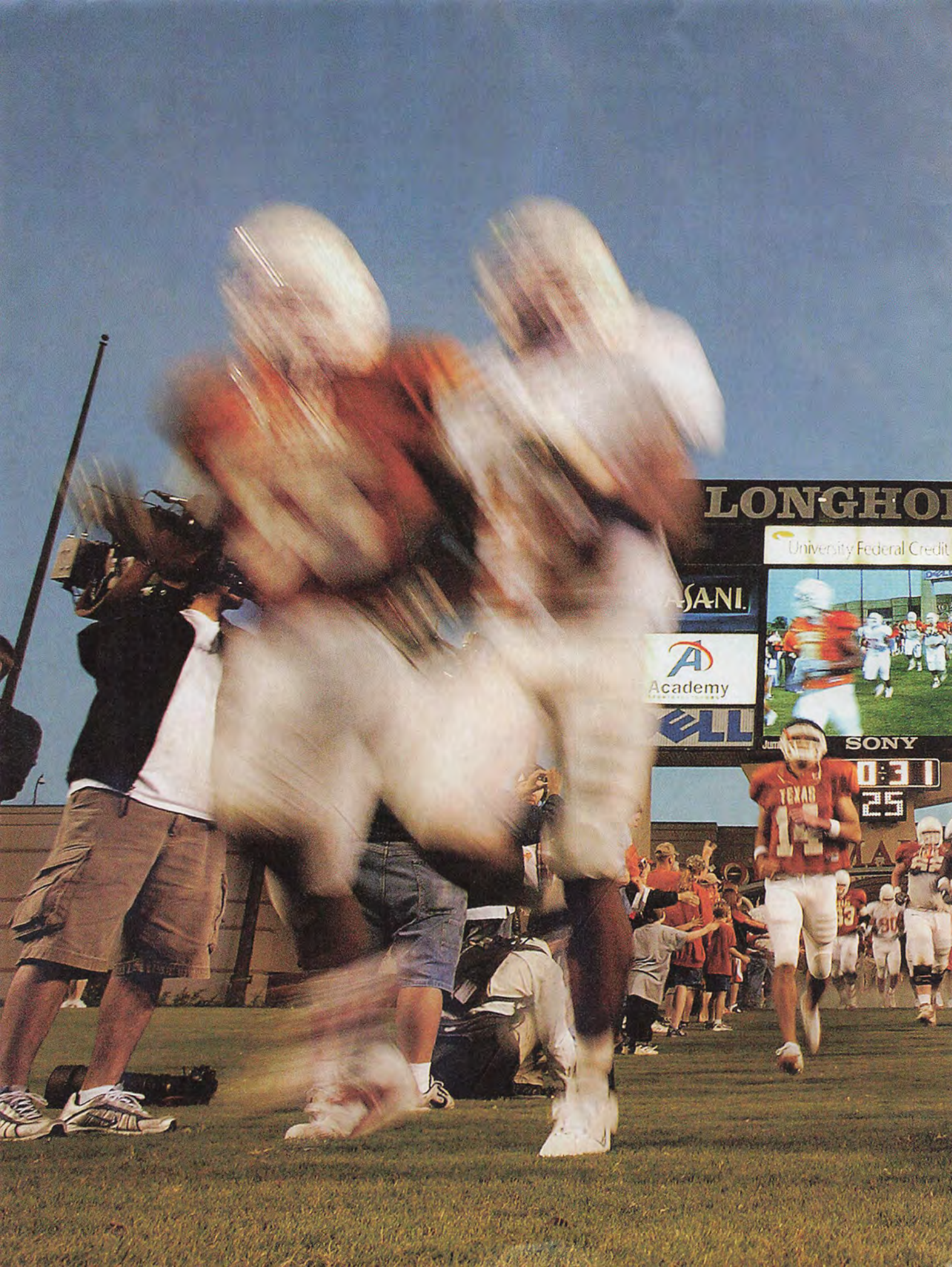
Leading Off

Wait for the Snap

To help them build strength, Ohio State linemen wear harnesses during spring practice in Columbus, where they worked toward their ultimate goal: to spring receiver Ted Ginn Jr. (left) for some big gains this fall.

Photographs by Al Tielemans

For daily Web-only Leading Off galleries, go to **SI.com/scorecard**.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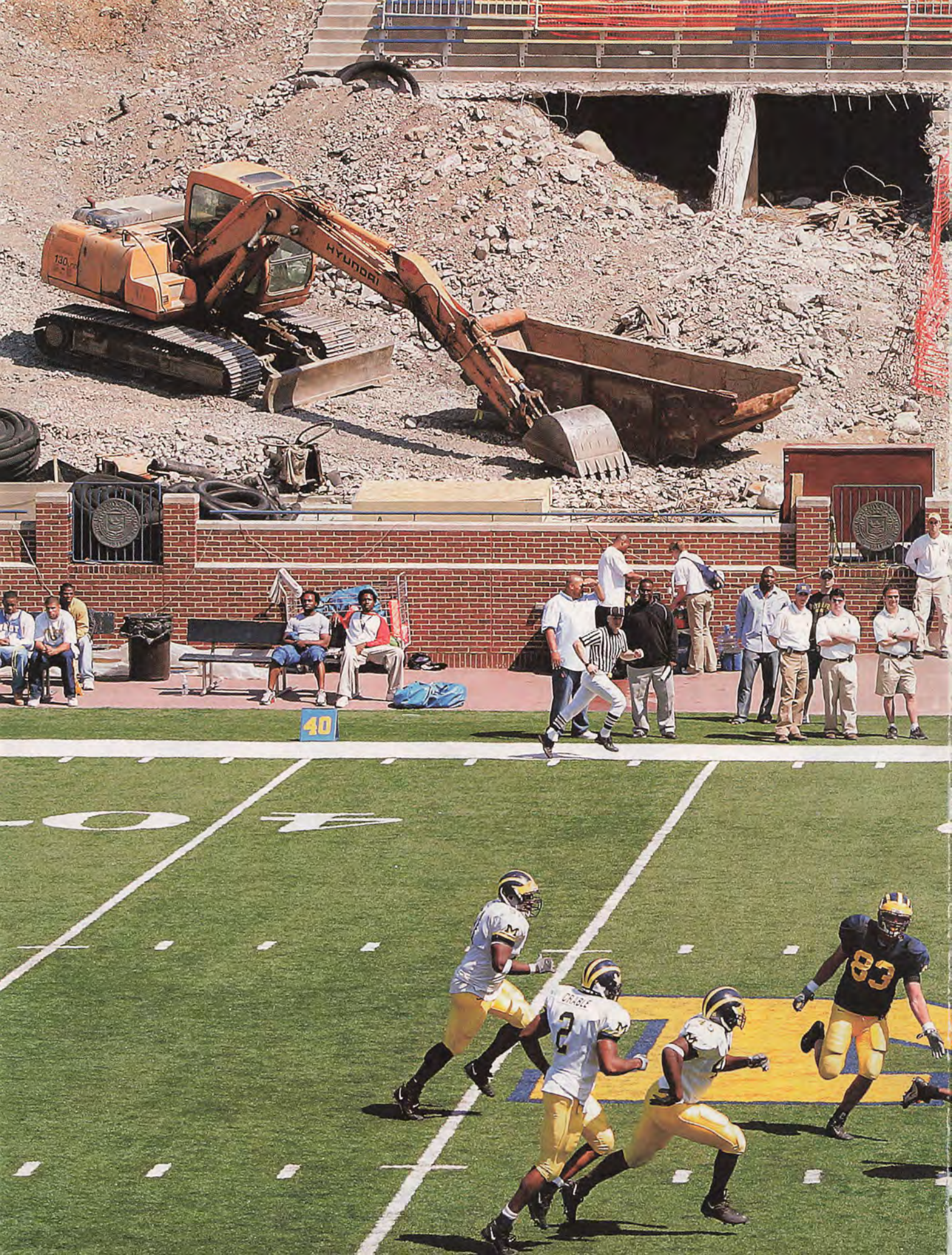
Leading Off

Horns Aplenty

There were 40,500 fans on hand to watch Texas's annual intrasquad spring game on April 2. The Longhorns will be led this season by quarterback Vince Young (right; page 54).

Photographs by
Darren Carroll


HYUNDAI
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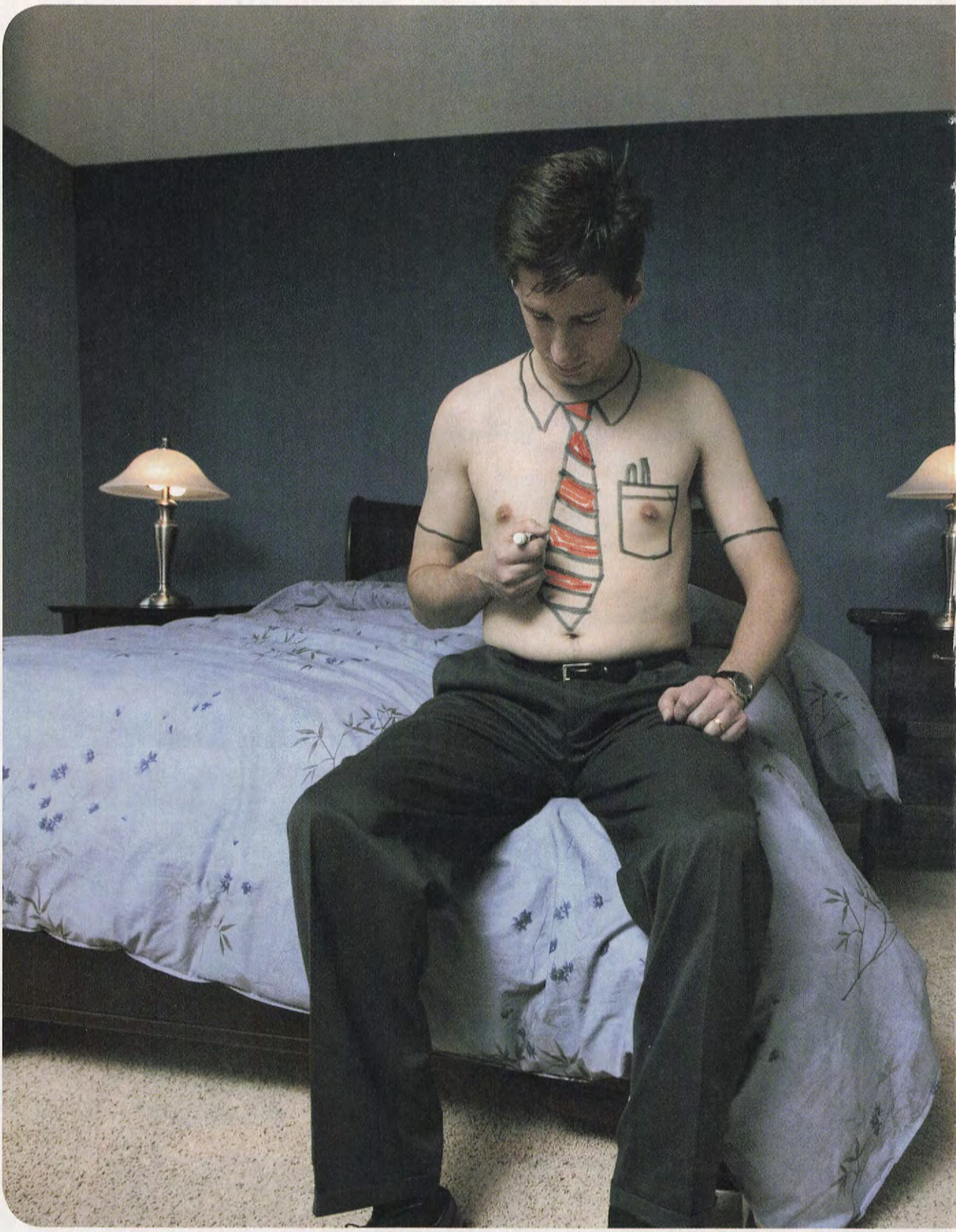
Leading Off

Hoe Down

Michigan is renovating the Big House, but that didn't keep quarterback Chad Henne (right) and the rest of the Wolverines from spring practice in Ann Arbor last Saturday.

Photographs by
Damian Strohmeyer



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Play Ball!

I had to laugh when I read the subhead on the New York Yankees' scouting report in your 2005 Baseball Preview (April 4): "If a retooled rotation lives up to its billing, they will end their championship drought." As a lifelong Cleveland Indians fan, let me assure you that five years is just a few minutes between drinks of water; it isn't a drought.

Brian Fahey, New York City

When Derek Jeter says, "They have what we want" on the cover of the baseball issue, is he talking about the Red Sox' Manny Ramirez?

Felipe Santiago, Granada Hills, Calif.

Card Game

As a 13-year-old boy growing up in Oakland in the summer of 1982, I collected anything related to baseball. I spent many nights riding BART trains home from A's games, reading lineup cards I had begged the visiting team's manager to give me as I hung over the dugout rail after the game was over. The Holy Grail of my lineup card collection has always been the one from June 23. This was the game—featured in your lineups time line—in which A's manager Billy Martin formed his lineup by pulling names from a hat, a desperate measure to put an end to a miserable losing streak. Kansas City Royals manager Dick Howser was clearly ill-prepared for Martin's last-minute stunt, as he had to cross out and rewrite the names of all nine A's players on his lineup card.

Tom LaChapelle
San Luis Obispo, Calif.

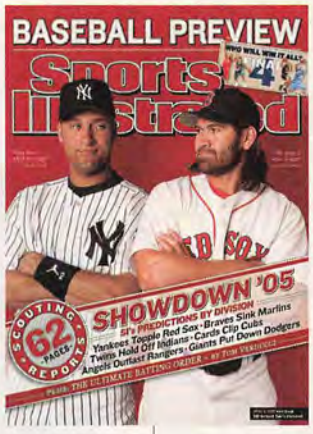
KANSAS CITY ROYALS
LINEUP CARD

	KANSAS CITY ROYALS		OPPONENTS
1	Wilson CF	1	Henderson
2	Leiber 2B	2	Murphy
3	Brett 3B	3	Johnson DH
4	Otis RF	4	Armas
5	White DH	5	Burroughs
6	Aikens 1B	6	Lopes
7	Martin LF	7	Lopes
8	White C	8	Wilson
9	Washington SS	9	Heath

SCRATCH 'N' PLAY Martin's ploy had Howser making quick revisions.

What? Have you given up on the hope—as expressed on your April 5, 2004, cover—of the Chicago Cubs' winning the World Series?

Michael Podraza
Chicago


BASEBALL PREVIEW
Sports Illustrated
SHOWDOWN '05
SI's PREDICTIONS BY DIVISION
Yankees Topple Red Sox • Braves Sink Marlins
Twins Hold Off Indians • Cards Clip Cubs
Angels Outlast Rangers • Giants Put Down Dodgers
62 SCOUTING REPORTS

I know he spoke anonymously, but I'd really like to know which major league scout said of the National League champion St. Louis Cardinals, "This was a mediocre club last year until they ran the table at the end"? How a club that essentially ended the race for the NL Central pennant on July 20, and had a .500 record or better against every NL team except Houston, could be considered mediocre is beyond me. Perhaps MLB should expand its drug-testing policy to include scouts.

Michael G. Metzger, San Diego

Back Orders

In your time line of batting-order lore (*Memorable Moments in Batting Order History*, April 4), you missed perhaps the most amazing feat in batting order history. In the 1976 World Series the Cincinnati Reds—managed by Hall of Famer Sparky Anderson—used the exact same nine-man batting order and lineup throughout a four-game sweep of the Yankees. In part because this was the first Series in which the DH was used, no pitcher or pinch hitter for the Reds came to the plate the entire Series.

Anthony O. Mancuso, Columbus, Ohio

What about the May 18, 1912, Detroit-Philadelphia game during which Tigers players struck to protest Ty Cobb's suspension for attacking a heckler in the stands? Detroit fielded a lineup of college and sandlot players. Surely this phantom crew should have been included in your history of batting orders.

Ray Pennetti, Belleville, N.J.

Your time line would have been more complete if it had mentioned that Ken Griffey and his son hit back-to-back home runs in 1990.

Alex Keller, Keizer, Ore.

Spare Ire

I was so mad when I read the SCORECARD article on Liz Johnson's second-place finish at the PBA's Banquet Open (April 4). I couldn't believe that her first quote was, "Honestly, I didn't think I was good enough to bowl on the men's tour." Too humble, girl. Women can compete with men in certain conditions in which accuracy is more important than muscle. Liz is proof of this, and hopefully more women will follow her lead.

Jackie Wyckoff, Redwood City, Calif.

Annika Who?

I've never had much to do with golf—other than using televised tournaments as my designated nap time. I found myself pleasantly surprised, however, by Rick Reilly's column on Annika Sorenstam (LIFE OF REILLY, April 4). It was refreshing to read an article that reminds me of the real reason I watch sports in the first place—for the pure and unbridled competition.

Sarah J. Schamberger, Sarasota, Fla.

Kicking It Around

I was very pleased to find an article about the U.S. soccer team in each of my last two SIs (*Yes, Hard Feelings*, March 28; INSIDE SOCCER, April 4). Americans continue to bash soccer without trying to understand it, but one day the older generation will realize that Generation X is not only concerned about what was popular in sports when the baby boomers were kids.

Brian Griswold, Royal Oak, Mich.

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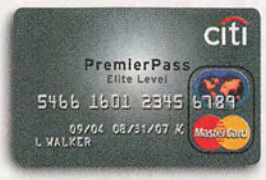

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It Was a Very Good Year

FOR ITS 86-page preview of the 2004 Athens Olympics, which ran in the Aug. 2, 2004, issue, SI last week received a National Magazine Award, the highest honor the industry gives. It was the ninth Ellie that SI has won.

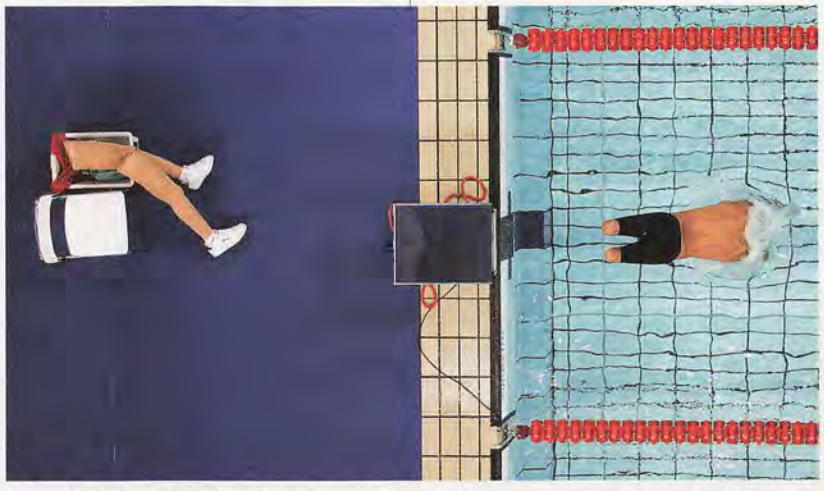
Looking back on the assignment, assistant managing editor Craig Neff, who has overseen coverage of the last three Olympics for SI, said, "Athens was a compelling preview subject because half the world expected the Games to be a disaster." But while security and construction worries dominated pre-Olympics headlines, Neff said, "there was also a great mix of stories and characters—the sort of material that journalists love to work with. Our staff earned its gold medal."

One key player, director of photography Steve Fine, was already celebrating when the Ellie news arrived. In a first for SI, the photo department won for Best Use of Photography at the National Press Photographers Association and the Missouri School of Journalism's Pictures of the Year Awards. And Bob Martin, a 10-year veteran of SI, won three first-place awards—at NPPA, World Press Photo, and National Headliners—for his shot of Spanish swimmer Xavier Torres diving into a pool at the Paralympics Games.

To get the picture, Martin climbed to a catwalk 100 feet above the Olympic Aquatic Centre wearing a safety harness. "As the only photographer at the Paralympics for SI, I decided to apply myself to that one overhead shot, and whatever happened, I would go with that," he says. The result is startling. "Your first reaction is, 'What the hell is this?' " says SI photography editor James Colton. "On one half of the frame you've got a pair of prosthetics in a basket used to hold the swimmer's clothes. On the other half the rest of the athlete's body. It's a bit disturbing, but it's also an image that signifies hope and faith."

Martin

Those virtues were also on display in SI's Sistine Chapel of Sports, a highlight of the 50th Anniversary Issue (Sept. 27, 2004), executed by illustrator Jeff Wong. The Michelangelo-inspired gatefold, which depicts such scenes as Lyle Alzado and Ben Johnson eating of the forbidden fruit and Pete Rose being banished from Eden, won a gold medal for SI's creative director, Steve Hoffman, from the Society of Publication Designers. □



BEST OF THE BEST Martin's poignant picture won top honors in three contests.

SIMON BRUTY (COVER); BOB MARTIN (2)

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In the United States Air Force, we learned long ago that knowledge is the most powerful tool on earth. So we go to great lengths to keep an eye on things above as well as below. Intelligence-gathering missions are an everyday occurrence for us. And so are the efforts that go into expanding our information-gathering systems. From launching satellites to monitoring literally 100,000 pieces of junk that orbit overhead, we are the eyes and ears of the nation. If you share our passion for information, maybe you should have your eyes on us. Call 1-800-423-USAF or log on to AIRFORCE.COM.

Diamonds In the Sky

by Steve Rushin

THIS SEASON on XM satellite radio you can listen to the broadcasts of every single major league baseball game, a technological marvel that marries Guglielmo Marconi (inventor of radio) to Bye Bye Balboni (slugger who struck out in nine straight plate appearances).

On any given night, anywhere in the U.S., you can flip from Harry Kalas calling a Phillies game to Herb Carneal calling a Twins game to Vin Scully calling a Dodgers game. And you'll discover that for every pitcher's delivery there's a signature play-by-play delivery. Reds announcer Marty Brennaman says, "He rocks and deals." Athletics announcer Bill King says, "The kick, the pitch." Indians announcer Tom Hamilton says, "He rocks and fires." You learn to identify these birds by the subtle differences in their calls.

XM subscribers get the home team's broadcast for all 2,430 big league games, replete with local commercials. Which is how I know that Twins catcher Joe Mauer drinks "Land O' Lakes milk in the Grip-N-Go bottle," while retired Twin Dan Gladden—reflecting different nutritional needs—prefers "Gluek's beer in the new quick-chill Alum-a-bottle." (Evidently, Minnesota is to bottling what Silicon Valley is to microchips: an industry innovator.)

The depraved listener, monitoring all 16 baseball channels, grows to anticipate and appreciate every sponsored shout-out. For the Cardinals, "This call to the bullpen is brought to you by Charter Telephone service." For the Devil Rays, "The starting lineups are delivered by UPS." And for the Reds, brilliantly, "The bottom of the fifth is brought to you by Old Forester bourbon." (Get it?) In Oakland, even the ominous legal disclaimer—demanding the "express written consent of Major League Baseball"—is sponsored by the law firm of Archer Norris.

This is Radio Free Stirrup, all baseball all the time, and it is highly addictive. I never heard Murrow during the Blitz. But I *will* hear Mulder facing Burnitz. That, too, exerts a powerful hold.

And so I can't switch channels when Red Sox announcers Joe Castiglione and Jerry Trupiano—inspired by the slow-footed Yankee Jason Giambi—begin a discursive discussion of the slowest Bosox of all time: They recall that after Tom Brunansky *grounded* into a 5-4-3 triple play against the Twins in 1990, shortstop Jody Reed did the very same thing four innings later. This reminds Castiglione of Joe Pignatano, who hit into a triple play in the final at bat of his career for the ridiculous '62 Mets.

Sometimes, everything comes together and an announcer works a sponsored shout-out into his delightful digression. The other night Rangers play-by-play man Eric Nadel, describing a fan's spectacular failure to catch a foul ball, reported, "The ball landed directly on top of his head. He *is* wearing a cap. He's now signaling that he's all right. He won't win the Good Hands Award."

It's all very voyeuristic, tuning in a Colorado Rockies game from 2,000 miles away to learn that "Todd Helton won't shop for diamonds anywhere but Fifth Avenue Designs in Cherry Creek." Turn on any team other than your own and, for nine innings, you occupy another life, full of strange suburbs ("Melanie Hudson of Upper Darby, you win a Phillies Fan Pack") and unfamiliar fast-food franchises (the Dodgers are sponsored by Del Taco).

With so many simultaneous games at your disposal, you frequently feel like an operator eavesdropping on a party line. When Mets announcer Howie Rose said, "I can't remember the last time I saw a team do defensive drills during the time allotted to batting practice" (as the Mets did one evening last week), I *could* remember. Diamondbacks announcer Greg Schulte, calling a game in Phoenix that very afternoon, had said, "Believe it or not, the Rockies took infield today. We don't see many major league teams do that."

> Satellite radio gives you all baseball, all the time. I never heard Murrow during the Blitz. But I *will* hear Mulder facing Burnitz.

But what really makes baseball on satellite radio so exciting, so XM-plary, are the voices. I had heard *of* Denny Matthews, who has called all 37 seasons in Kansas City Royals history. But I had never *heard* Matthews until last week, when I sat enrapt as he ridiculed someone's shabby umbrella: "If you try to bring that onto a golf course, you're immediately summoned to the pro shop and asked to leave the premises." Bob Uecker flies solo in the Brewers' booth, and he lets each game breathe like a Bordeaux, pausing for epic stretches of silence filled only by distant vendor cries. In doing so, Ueck proves the truth of what Mozart said: It's the silence between the notes that makes the music.

Speaking of wine and Mozart and things that age well, Vin Scully, at 77, remains nothing less than a national treasure, turning routine groundouts into sonic literature. The other night, when he described Dodgers shortstop Cesar Izturis spearing a ball by "falling to his left like a statue that's been pushed over," I sat in the dark a continent away and thanked providence that I live in this age of technological wonder. The glowing digital dial of my satellite radio read MLB ON XM. But I knew otherwise. This, really, was the Voice of America. □

If you have a comment for Steve Rushin, sent it to **rushin@sileters.com.**

SIMON BRUTY

Sports Illustrated

Edited by
MARK BECHTEL AND
STEPHEN CANNELLA

"Curry's illness means the Bulls will

Scorec

The Creator

In researching a book on steroids, the author came face-to-face with the man reputed to be the driving force behind "the clear," the drug at the center of the BALCO case **By Will Carroll**

To: Will Carroll
From: anon@anon.com
You have been asking the right questions to the right people. How can I contact you? X.

AFTER I'D SPENT months of investigating steroids in sports, this simple e-mail was a shocking breakthrough. It led me to the man who purports to be one of the leading creators of designer steroids—including THG, a.k.a. the clear, the drug at the center of the BALCO controversy. I cannot prove that he is who he claims to be, but I believe he is.

Our meeting took place in a midsized Midwestern airport. Dr. X, as I thought of him, had left instructions: I would wear jeans, a white T-shirt and an "appropriate" jacket—and have nothing in my pocket except one credit card, one bill no larger than a 10, plus my car key. There would be no recording devices, notepad or cameras. At the meeting I'd empty my pockets into my hand.

I walked to the spot Dr. X had indicated and took a seat. Soon a man in a wheelchair sat opposite me. He was solidly built. He wore a hat pulled low, and his eyes were too green to be anything but contacts. He pointed to the floor.

I looked down and said, "Darn floor"—one of our prearranged passwords. He popped a piece of candy into his mouth. "Big bite," he said. This was it.

"You've got 30 minutes before I'm back on a plane," he said.

I asked how he created THG. He explained that it is a substance that is chemically similar to Gestrinone (an infertility drug) and Trenbolone (an anabolic steroid), and that it had been around since the late 1990s. While Dr. X wasn't the first to make it, he refined the process and was one of the few who could produce and distribute the substance. He'd get Gestrinone by sending women to a fertility specialist "who'd write the pass [prescription], and we'd pay cash. Doctors love that, man. We'd spend a couple hundred, spin it [mix the components] and sell it for a couple thousand."

He said there was a lot of cheap "gear" (the term insiders use for steroids) on the market, made for "pathetic losers looking not to have sand kicked in their faces. The world-class athletes who use my stuff can afford good gear"—the kind impossible to detect.

Dr. X doesn't sell the drugs to athletes, though; he prefers to deal with distributors. "The users can't be trusted, even though they have their [reputations] to lose because—guess what? They're users. They'll lie, cheat, steal, kill their grandma to get what they want."

"So you never have contact with athletes?"

be without their leading scorer for the playoffs. —FOR THE RECORD, PAGE 20

ard

"Not zero contact." Dr. X said he went to events like The Arnold Classic, a bodybuilding contest and trade show in Columbus, Ohio, cofounded by Arnold Schwarzenegger, where "I'd see guys—but I don't need athletes. You saw [BALCO president Victor] Conte there acting like a rock star, putting him and [Barry] Bonds in ads for zinc. Give me a break. I don't have that ego. I know my stuff is the best out there. I hear who's working with who. I know who's winning."

Dr. X is famous in the steroid underworld because his drugs are undetectable—THG, for example, breaks down when the sample dries out in the testing process. He showed no patience for athletes who use detectable steroids such as Deca (which Jason Giambi reportedly admitted using). "Idiots," he said. "Is testing a problem for those people? Yes, but life is a problem for them. Most of these guys aren't more than savants who have a physical skill or two."

He was especially disdainful of Giambi. "Here is this guy with all the money in the world who's taking something you can find at Gold's Gym? You take Deca today and come back in 2006, and you're gonna pop [test positive]. A guy on my stuff could walk into the test with a needle in his ass and not worry."

The leagues, he said, were overmatched. The metaphor I'd heard was that tests were like looking through mug shots; if the shot wasn't already in the book, you couldn't identify the perpetrator. "Exactly!" he said. "If the NFL wants to test for every known steroid, that's more than 100 tests per player—32 teams, 53 players, 100 tests; and they aren't cheap. And that's for known substances. I know there's 10 they don't know about."

What about kids using his gear?

He ducked the question. "You want to fix this? Legalize it. Let me work in the open. Make my stuff prescription only. The amateur crap will still be there, but no one will have any incentive to take it. And don't give me any sob story about it ruining sports. None of them are going broke. More home runs means more money."

They called his flight. As he rolled to the gate, he asked if I'd been an athlete. I smiled and said his gear wouldn't have helped.

"Give me six weeks, and I'd have you in the best shape of your life," he said with a wink. For the first time I knew exactly what *Faustian* meant. I turned and walked back to my car, quickly. □

Will Carroll is coauthor of The Juice, *which will be in stores on April 26.*

ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF WONG; COURTESY OF THE BIG IDEA WITH DONNY DEUTSCH/CNBC (OWENS); PETER READ MILLER (OWENS PLAYING)

Get Me Rewrite!

He won over finicky Philly fans. Now can Terrell Owens parlay that goodwill into a new deal?

By the time Eagles wide receiver Terrell Owens released a statement last Friday saying he would no longer be commenting on his demands for a new contract, there really wasn't much else for him to say. Earlier in the week Owens told anyone who would listen—including CNBC talk show host Donny Deutsch, who watched as Owens broke down in tears on the air—that the seven-year, $49 million contract he signed 13 months ago was no longer sufficient.

Owens took what he said was a substandard deal from the Eagles after he engineered a trade from San Francisco, which had wanted to send him to Baltimore. "[The Eagles] used their leverage to strong-arm us because they knew I wanted to leave Baltimore for Philadelphia, and they capitalized on it," Owens told *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. "I can't go for that now." Owens's 2005 salary is $3.25 million; his backloaded deal, which included an $8.5 million signing bonus, will pay him $28 million over the final four years—assuming he is still with the Eagles. Last year Owens, 31, showed signs of wear for the first time in his 10-year career when a broken leg and severely sprained ankle kept him out of four games. Still, Owens will likely never be in a stronger negotiating position. He had a team-record 14 touchdown catches last year and became beloved in Philadelphia. And he can point to the precedent set last week when the Patriots gave running back Corey Dillon a five-year, $25 million extension after one season with the team.

MONEY PLAYER Owens missed the Eagles' first two playoff games, then had nine catches in the Super Bowl.

But it won't be easy for Owens. The first meeting between his new agent, Drew Rosenhaus, and Eagles president Joe Banner lasted less than 10 minutes. It wasn't surprising. The Eagles thrive on playing hardball. They've had bitter public negotiations with Duce Staley and Jeremiah Trotter, and Banner has frowned upon guaranteeing money to any player in his 30s. Banner also must consider the message that appeasing Owens would send to other Eagles—including running back Brian Westbrook and defensive tackles Hollis Thomas and Corey Simon—who have said they'd like new deals. The negotiation could turn into one of the more fascinating off-season events since . . . well, since last winter, when Owens showed a knack for getting his way by pulling off an escape from San Francisco. —*Jeffri Chadiha*

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For the Record

ACTION IMAGES/WIREIMAGE.COM (RADCLIFFE)

Redeemed British runner Paula Radcliffe *(above)*, who won the London Marathon on Sunday in 2:17:42, the fastest time ever recorded in a women-only race and more than five minutes ahead of the field. Radcliffe, who was the favorite to win the Olympic marathon, dropped out after 22 miles in Athens because of stomach pains and also withdrew during the 10,000 meters later in the week. An established front-runner, Radcliffe shot to the lead immediately in London, running the first mile in a blistering 5:03. Again at 22 miles she doubled over and stopped for 10 seconds to shake off stomach cramps. "I'd just like to apologize to the nation for stopping like that, but I was losing 10 seconds every time I felt a cramp," she said. Radcliffe's victory interrupted a string of outstanding results by Kenyan runners who claimed podium places around the globe on the busiest marathon weekend of the year. Martin Lel won the men's division of the London race in 2:07:26 on Sunday, and on Monday his countrywoman Catherine Ndereba became the first woman to win the Boston Marathon four times. (Kenyan men were second and third behind Ethiopia's Hailu Negussie in Boston.) Said Ndereba, the 2004 Olympic silver medalist, "We feel we can win any race."

Reported To the Greensboro Grasshoppers, the Marlins' Class A affiliate, righthander Jeff Allison. Florida's top pick in the 2003 draft, Allison, 20, has fought an addiction to the prescription painkiller OxyContin and nearly died of a heroin overdose last summer, and he hasn't pitched in two years (SI, Dec. 20, 2004). The Marlins announced he will work out with the Grasshoppers until he is ready to pitch. The team also forbade Allison from talking to reporters. "They're getting him ready to play baseball," Grasshoppers president Donald Moore said. "Beyond that, I have no comment."

Sworn in As a U.S. citizen, Bernard Lagat, who won a silver medal for Kenya in the 1,500 meters at the 2004 Olympics. The change in nationality means Lagat, the second-fastest metric miler in history, will miss the track world championships in Helsinki this August. Under IAAF rules athletes who transfer citizenship can't represent their new countries in international competition for at least 12 months, though if Kenya doesn't approve the change, Lagat could be forced to sit out three years. "I thought long and hard before changing my nationality," said Lagat, who has a home in Tucson and has lived in the U.S. since 1996. "But, at 30, I have to look to my future after my running career has come to an end."

Go Figure

45 Strikeouts in Division II Lynn's 2–1 softball win over Saint Leo last Friday; Saint Leo's Katie Heintz had 23, Lynn's Aimee Murch had 22.

3 Times the Blue Jays' Reed Johnson was hit by a pitch—twice with the bases loaded—in a win over the Rangers last Saturday, tying a major league record.

29 Percentage decrease in this year's harvest of edible sunflower seeds; experts fear there will be a seed shortage this baseball season.

5 Complete games by Marlins pitchers this season.

15 Teams that had fewer than five complete games in 2004.

Shell Houston Open
Watch Singh and Toms shoot it out in Texas.
APRIL 21-22, 4pm ET/PT USA NETWORK
APRIL 23-24, 3pm ET CBS SPORTS
PGA TOUR
Vijay Singh
Defending Champion
These Guys are Good.
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Benched For the rest of the season by the Bulls' medical staff, center Eddy Curry *(above)*, who hasn't played since experiencing an irregular heartbeat before a game in Charlotte on March 30. Curry, 22, has been examined by heart specialists in Chicago and Boston but the causes of his arrhythmia—which recurred only briefly after he returned from Charlotte—are still unknown. Doctors say the tests so far have been favorable but not conclusive, and the team wants Curry to undergo six more weeks of testing. That means the Bulls will make their first playoff appearance since 1998 without their top scorer. (Curry is averaging 16.1 points and 5.4 rebounds per game.) "I really think everything will turn out for the best," said Curry. "But right now I've got to be cautious."

Saved From a near collision with a speeding truck on a Boston street, Patrick McCarthy, 8, who was scooped away from danger by Alex Rodriguez. The Yankees' third baseman was waiting at a crosswalk on the afternoon of April 12 when McCarthy started to run across Newbury Street. Rodriguez reached out and pulled him back to the curb just before the truck sped by. "I just looked up, and I saw Alex Rodriguez," said McCarthy, who was already a New York fan despite living on Martha's Vineyard. "And I said, 'My name's Patrick McCarthy, and I'm going to pitch for the Yankees someday.'" Said the boy's father, Joe, "We're just glad it wasn't Bill Buckner who was there."

Ending After 35 years, *Monday Night Football*'s run on ABC. Under the terms of the new broadcast deal that the NFL signed on Monday, ESPN will broadcast *MNF* starting with the 2006 season. ESPN's deal runs for eight seasons and calls for the games to be aired at 8:40 p.m. The pact also will bring the NFL back to NBC after a six-year absence: The Peacock will take over Sunday night games from ESPN for the next six years. (NBC will also get the 2009 and 2012 Super Bowls.) The deal leaves ABC, which is losing $150 million a year on the *MNF* deal it signed in 1998, as the only one of the four major networks without the NFL. Said NBC Sports chairman Dick Ebersol, "A great deal with the NFL is the best deal you can get in television."

Confessed To planting a bomb in Atlanta's Centennial Park during the 1996 Olympics, Eric Rudolph. The former Army explosives expert pleaded guilty in federal court last week to the Olympic bombing as well as three other bombings of two women's clinics and a gay nightclub. Rudolph, 38, said the Olympic bombing was intended to shut down the Games and embarrass the U.S. government. One person was killed and 111 injured in the Olympic attack. Rudolph, who eluded capture until being arrested in 2003, was sentenced to four consecutive life sentences without parole.

Died At age 45 after a two-year fight with intestinal cancer, Panthers linebackers coach Sam Mills. An undersized (5' 9", 225 pounds) linebacker, Mills played in the USFL for three seasons before having a successful 12-year NFL career with the Saints and Carolina, during which he made the Pro Bowl five times. He joined the Panthers' staff in 1998 and, after learning he had cancer before the 2003 season, he continued to coach between chemotherapy treatments. "I'm around something I enjoy, and that is very important," Mills told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in February 2004. "As long as I have the power in me to go ahead and continue to coach, I will."

Retiring Lance Armstrong, 33, who announced on Monday that this year's Tour de France will be his final race. The six-time Tour champ, who recently signed with a new team sponsored by the Discovery Channel, said he wants to spend more time with his three children and working to raise cancer awareness. "Ultimately, athletes have to retire," he said.

BRIAN KERSEY/AP (CURRY); JAMES GLOVER II/VENTURA COUNTY STAR NEWSPAPER/AP (ARMSTRONG); PHIL HOFFMANN (FERNANDEZ AND FERNANDEZ PLAYING)

Back in Action

After being wounded in Iraq, a former Army lacrosse star returns to the field

IN APRIL 2003 Army lacrosse coach Jack Emmer's cellphone rang. It was former Black Knights captain John Fernandez, who'd been serving as a first lieutenant in the Iraq war. Fernandez, 27, was at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C.; the day before his left foot and part of his right leg had been amputated, the result of a combat injury. Fernandez said to Emmer, "I'm going to come back and play in the alumni game."

Fernandez, who needed four months to learn to walk with prosthetics, made good on his promise last fall, scoring a goal in the annual game between Emmer's current team and alumni. He was back again last Friday in Annapolis, in the inaugural Army-Navy Alumni Lacrosse Game. "I'm a bit out of shape," he says, "but glad I could get out there."

DUTY CALLS Fernandez was one of 75 Army alums who took on Navy.

The event raised $110,000 for the Fallen Heroes Fund for families of soldiers killed or wounded in Iraq. Fernandez now lives on Long Island with his wife, Kristi, and their year-old daughter, Madison. He is studying to become a high school math teacher. "This is just something I have to deal with—you put your shoes on every day, I put on my legs," he says. "Don't give me any credit I don't deserve."

The Show

By Bill Scheft

GOOD TO BE HERE. Well, I guess it was only a matter of time. Three of my friends from college have to go to Washington to explain the steroid policy in our Rotisserie League.

Alex Rodriguez rescues eight-year-old boy in Boston I still don't have all the details. Apparently the kid was about to be hit by a truck or Gary Sheffield.

Chris House, the Red Sox fan who may have taken a swipe at Sheffield during an April 14 game, is not out of the woods yet. He may still get jail time, a fine or season tickets to the Pistons.

House was a former assistant football coach at MIT. He left MIT when the offense switched to the pi formation.

At the Red Sox' home opener the Yankees stood and applauded while the Sox raised the world championship banner. It was all very classy, until A-Rod tried to slap the ring off Bronson Arroyo's finger.

For the first time since 1971 the Dodgers do not have names on the back of their road jerseys. And Derek Lowe is willing to not wear DODGERS on the front.

Dodger Stadium has added 1,600 seats behind home plate and down the foul line. Not only that, they also moved the fence in right-field back 10 feet to create a "time-out" corner for Milton Bradley.

As part of the $20 million renovation the Dodgers are planning to replace every seat in the park. So fans won't be inconvenienced, the work won't begin until the bottom of the sixth.

NFL lowers threshold for testosterone Testing players for testosterone levels has gotten much tougher. Starting this season, you have to name a dozen show tunes in under a minute.

The league is now prohibiting the sale of customized Michael Vick jerseys with his pseudonym, RON MEXICO, on the back. That's odd. I thought you could buy a Mexico jersey if your Visa was in order.

NBA heads for postseason I hope I'm not too late with a playoffs slogan for TNT: "40 games in 40 nights in 16 medium-size markets."

Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor called the acquisitions of Latrell Sprewell and Sam Cassell a "failed experiment." The two Minnesota players are making $20 million this season. Quick, somebody revive Carl Pohlad!

The NBA may be near a deal forbidding players to enter the draft until their 20th birthday. Or until four years after they're allowed to have their mom buy them a Hummer.

Pacers forward Jermaine O'Neal raised the issue of race being behind the proposed NBA age limit. And David Stern quickly replied, "Yo, yo, yo. You got me wrong, dog."

NASCAR signs five-year, $107 million deal with Sirius satellite radio I wonder if they'll do cross-promotion with the Howard Stern satellite show and have women go on the air and take their restrictor plates off.

NASCAR recently hired the former deputy campaign manager of Kerry-Edwards '04 to manage its national media outreach efforts. Well, of course. Because, when you think of handling the media, you think Kerry-Edwards.

Dodgers' 1955 world champions banner gets $16,000 restoration There's only one thing baseball fans in Brooklyn would prefer to see hanging: Walter O'Malley.

Philadelphia Eagles to launch kids' animated TV series The show will be based on the team. What does that mean? The characters become less animated with 5:40 to go?

My time is up. You've been great. Enjoy LTD.

Bill Scheft couldn't get his accountant to write off the Knicks season as entertainment.

Q+A

Jerry Bailey

The 47-year-old Hall of Fame jockey is the author of the just published *Against the Odds: Riding for My Life*

SI: You've been sober since 1989 and your book details your alcoholism. How did your drinking affect your riding?

Bailey: I was never falling-down drunk when I went into the paddock to get on a horse, but toward the end I had some alcohol in my body at all times and I was far less than 100 percent.

SI: You won the Florida Derby on High Fly, and you'll ride him in the Kentucky Derby. Make a case for him to win.

Bailey: People have said that he's not bred to go that far, the extra eighth of a mile. But he has a lot of ones by his name, and that's always a plus for the Derby.

SI: You won the Derby on Sea Hero in 1993 and on Grindstone in '96. What is the most important factor in the race?

Bailey: Luck. I've seen a lot of the best horses not win because of bad racing luck. Now, you can enhance your luck by making wise decisions, but there are a lot of times when something that somebody else does in front of you dictates what you can or cannot do.

SI: If you could put together the ultimate horse race, which six would be in the field?

Bailey: Secretariat, Citation, Cigar, Seabiscuit, Silky Sullivan and Man o' War. I'd ride Cigar.

SI: Do you keep a book on other jockeys?

Bailey: I keep it between my ears. It's always been my contention that horses might change from race to race, but humans don't. Most jockeys fall into the same patterns. If you ride with them enough you get familiar with them. And if you pay attention, you can learn a lot.

SI: Should the Triple Crown season be lengthened to allow more time between races?

Bailey: The season is hard for a reason. There's a reason why only a handful of horses have been able to [win the Triple Crown]. If you start changing the rules now, it's unfair to the horses that have done the same thing in the past. —*Richard Deitsch*

ILLUSTRATION BY DREW FRIEDMAN; AMY SUSSMAN/GRAYLOCK.COM/AP (BAILEY); BILL DENVER/ICON SMI (BAILEY RIDING)

The Beat

By Lisa Altobelli

PICTURE THIS At the 2000 Republican National Convention, Laura Bush said that her husband "never loses sight of home plate." After throwing four presidential first pitches, he seems to know his way around the mound, too. Before the Nationals' home opener at RFK Stadium last Thursday (page 44) George W. Bush warmed up with Washington catcher Brian Schneider, then fired a ceremonial strike in front of 45,596 fans.

THOUGH IT will air on the Golf Channel, **Natalie Gulbis**'s new reality program will feature bikinis as well as birdies. *Natalie*, a six-episode series that premieres on July 19, will take viewers on Gulbis's 2006 swimsuit calendar shoot as well as on the town with Gulbis and fellow LPGA golfer **Cristie Kerr**. The show will also feature Pittsburgh quarterback **Ben Roethlisberger** trying to get in good with Gulbis's dad, **John** *(below)*, a Harley-riding retired probation officer. Roethlisberger, 23, had been denying since January that he and Gulbis *(left)* were a couple, but he came clean last month after golfing with Gulbis, 22, in a pro-am at the Kraft Nabisco Championship in Rancho Mirage, Calif. "It was good to see her and hang out," said Roethlisberger.

■ With her husband, **Curt**, on the mound against the Blue Jays on Monday, **Shonda Schilling** wasn't in her usual seat at Fenway Park. She did jog by, however, during the 109th running of the Boston Marathon. Shonda ran the marathon in 5:23.20 and raised more than $50,000 for Shade, the skin-cancer foundation she started after she was diagnosed with malignant melanoma on her back four years ago. Shonda, 37, and a mother of four, was anxious about the prospect of her husband having a big day without her. "I've been sitting in those stands for 15 years," she told him. "Don't throw a no-hitter without me." Curt obliged: He went five innings to get the win in a 12–7 victory over the Jays before meeting his wife at the finish line.

■ Call them the Indie-ana Pacers. Both **Reggie Miller** and **Dale Davis** have started companies that will produce independent films this summer. Miller, who is retiring after the season, called his outfit Boom Baby Productions, after the phrase that Pacers radio commentator **Bob Leonard** uses when Miller drains a three-pointer. He's invested $1 million into his first film, a drama called *Beautiful Ohio* that will be directed by **Chad Lowe** and coproduced by Lowe's wife, **Hilary Swank**. "It's great for them to accept me and help me," Miller, 39, told *The Indianapolis Star*. "For her to come off another Oscar, there's so many other things she can be doing." Davis, 36, is calling his company WAR Entertainment, which stands for World Ain't Right. He's at work on *Double or Nothing*, about a stand-up comic who gets in over his head with a bookie.

THIS WEEK'S SIGN OF THE **APOCALYPSE**

Irish bookmaker Paddy Power has taken more than $250,000 in bets on the identity of the next pope.

■ Wimbledon champ **Maria Sharapova** can no longer use the excuse that's she's only 17 (SI, Feb. 17). The Russian tennis star celebrated her 18th birthday with a bash last week at Hiro, a Japanese restaurant in New York City. Invites were sent in canisters of pink tennis balls to a guest list of 250 that included **Lindsay Lohan**, **Brooke Burns** and **Fergie** of the Black Eyed Peas. Maroon 5 provided the entertainment, and Sharapova danced to their cover of AC/DC's *Highway to Hell*. . . . Former ice queen **Nancy Kerrigan** gave birth to her second child last Thursday. The 1994 silver medalist and her husband—her agent and manager—**Jerry Solomon**, named the seven-pound, nine-ounce boy **Brian**.

They Said It

PAUL NEWMAN Actor, 80, on what his wife, Joanne Woodward, thinks of his hobby of race car driving: "She doesn't buy jewelry, she doesn't buy dresses. She buys insurance."

NEIL LEIFER (PICTURE THIS); KEVIN KANE/WIREIMAGE.COM (NEWMAN); TODD BIGELOW/AURORA (JOHN GULBIS); ROBERT LABERGE/GETTY IMAGES (NATALIE GULBIS)

The Week Ahead

What to watch and watch for **By Amanda Cherrin**

FRIDAY 22

The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson **CBS 12:37 a.m.** | Don King visits. **European PGA Johnnie Walker Classic Golf Channel 9 a.m.** | Korea's K.J. Choi tries to become the first Asian-born player to win the tournament, which makes its Beijing debut.

SATURDAY 23

Ducky Derby | More than 12,000 rubber ducks will race down a 75-yard waterway in Harvey West Park in Santa Cruz. **NFL Draft ESPN noon** | Will the Niners take a QB? And how many times will Mel Kiper Jr. and crew say *upside* in the 5½-hour broadcast?

SUNDAY 24

Mavericks Surf Contest NBC 4 p.m. | Top big-wave boarders faced 40-foot surf and jagged rocks last month in Half Moon Bay, Calif. **A's at Angels ESPN 8 p.m.** | Are Rich Harden, Danny Haren and Joe Blanton Oakland's next big three? Their combined ERA: 1.93.

MONDAY 25

Braves at Mets ESPN 7 p.m. | A rematch in Queens. When John Smoltz and Pedro Martinez met two weeks ago, Smoltz tied his team record with 15 strikeouts. But Martinez threw a two-hitter, giving the Mets their first win and starting a six-game winning streak.

TUESDAY 26

In Stores: *Wilt, 1962* by Gary M. Pomerantz | A look at Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point game and the Stilt's impact on his sport. ***In Their Own Words: Marvin Lewis*** **NFL Network 9 p.m.** | In two years Lewis has transformed the Bengals from doormat to contender.

WEDNESDAY 27

College Softball, No. 4 Texas at No. 5 Texas A&M ESPN2 8 p.m. | The last time the Lone Star State's top teams took the field, second baseman Chez Sievers went 3 for 3 and led the Longhorns to a 3–0 victory, snapping the Aggies' 18-game winning streak.

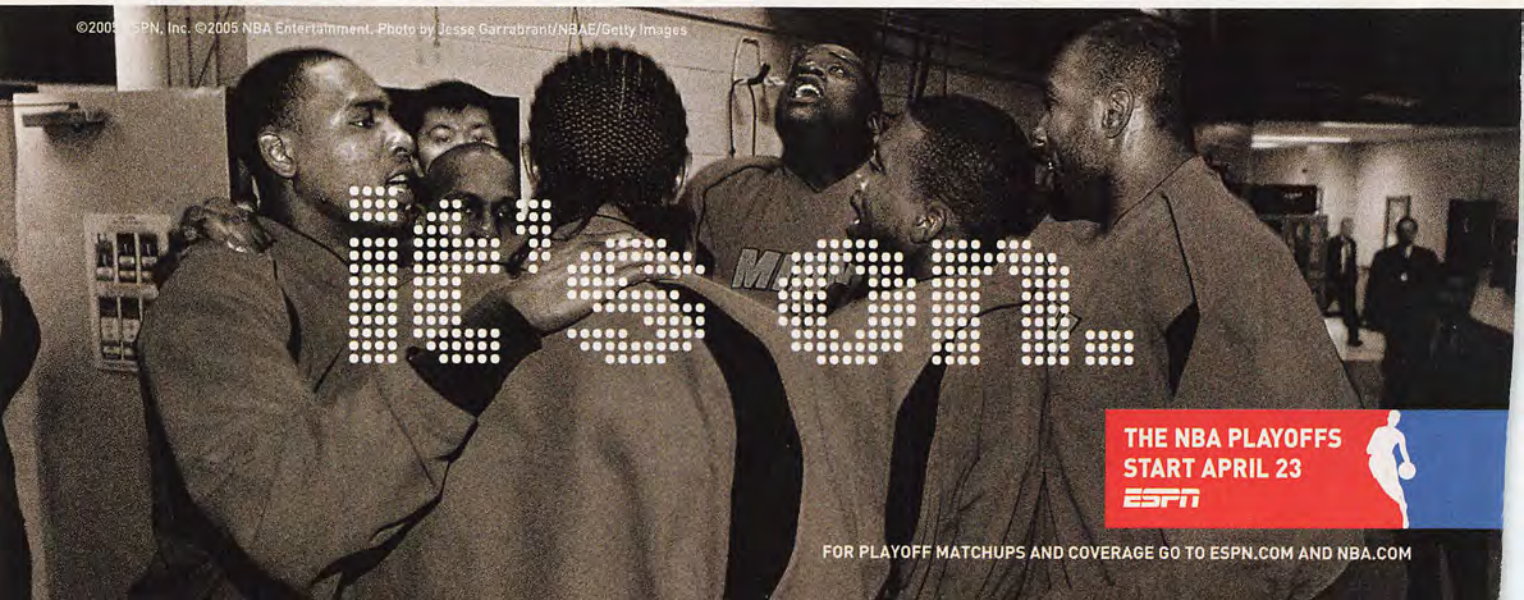
THURSDAY 28

International Motor Sports Hall of Fame Induction | Darrell Waltrip heads the class of five honorees in Talladega. **On this date** | In 1990 the Celtics set an NBA playoff record for points in a 157–128 win over the Knicks. Said New York's Patrick Ewing, "We stunk."

Under Review

It's such a simple idea that you wonder why more broadcasters don't do it: selling uncut games on DVD as an alternative to overproduced, watered-down commemorative highlight reels. ABC has released the four most recent BCS bowl games on DVD, unedited and without commercials. The result is a joy for rabid fans—or anyone who likes listening to Keith Jackson. The discs contain extras (coverage of practices and features on players) that you should find enjoyable—so long as you're a fan of the winning team; the losers are ignored. The best features come with the Rose Bowl. Texas fullback Ahmard Hall, who walked on after serving in combat with the Marines, is profiled, as is Noble Doss. In 1940 Doss made the most famous catch in Longhorns history, snagging a pass over his shoulder to set up the only score in an upset of Texas A&M. The next year he dropped a sure touchdown pass that hit him in the numbers, costing Texas a trip to the Rose Bowl. The interview with a teary 84-year-old Doss, who says he's thought about the play every day since, is heartbreaking. Just about the only things missing are the halftime spectacles; if you saw Ashlee Simpson perform at the Orange Bowl, you'll know this is not necessarily a bad thing. —M.B.

MITCH JACOBSON/AP (KING); BEN MARGOT/AP (SURFERS); PAUL VATHIS/AP (CHAMBERLAIN); BOB LEVERONE/SPORTING NEWS/ICON SMI (WALTRIP); COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS (LONGHORNS SOFTBALL); JOHN IACONO (MARTINEZ)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SYLVANIA

SPORTSMANSHIP EDITION

Faces in the Crowd

In the tradition of SI's Sportsman of the Year, we periodically pay tribute in this space to men and women who represent the ideals of sportsmanship.

Nicole Corriero

THORNHILL, ONT.

Corriero, a senior at Harvard who this season tied the alltime collegiate ice hockey record (men's or women's) with 59 goals, cochairs the Harvard-Radcliffe Foundation for Women's Athletics. She also volunteers at Harvard Square Homeless Shelter.

Joe Hale

CINCINNATI

Hale, 55, president of the Cinergy Foundation, is competing in 7 on 7 in 7—seven marathons on seven continents in seven months—to raise money for the March of Dimes. So far he has completed four of the marathons and raised more than $130,000 for the charity.

Peter Fuhrman

HAMILTON, N.J.

Fuhrman, 48, an advertising executive, founded Bats, Balls, Gloves and Kids, a group that, working with The College of New Jersey, has collected 400 used bats and other baseball equipment from area athletes. The gear is sent to children in the Philippines.

John-Henry Lambin

GARDNERVILLE, NEV.

John-Henry, a homeschooled sixth-grader who has asthma and dyslexia, has created a program called Kids Extreme, which provides support for young people with those conditions and encourages them to participate in skiing, golf and rock climbing.

Mark Sherman and Jacob Carey

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y.

Sherman, 53 (far left), and Carey, 45, an orthopedic surgeon and surgical technician, respectively, founded the Unity Games, which promote competition among racially mixed teams. Last month 270 seventh- and eighth-graders participated in the third annual Games, learning how to work together on the basketball court and in workshops on drugs and gangs.

To submit a candidate for future Sportsmanship Editions of Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces.**

Trivial Matters

By David Sabino

Political Pitches

The First Fan In keeping with tradition, President George W. Bush threw out the first pitch at the Washington Nationals' home opener last Thursday—95 years to the day after William Howard Taft became the first commander in chief to make an Opening Day toss. (Taft threw out the first pitch in the Washington Senators' 3–0 win over the Philadelphia A's at Griffith Stadium.) Taft, however, wasn't the first president to attend a major league game. Who was?

a. Grover Cleveland
b. Benjamin Harrison
c. William McKinley
d. Theodore Roosevelt

He's Not Game Since Taft's pitch, only one president did not throw a ceremonial Opening Day first pitch at a major league game while in office. Who was it?

Call to Order Place these players in order of the number of Opening Day presidential pitches they caught.

a. Rick Dempsey
b. Chris Hoiles
c. Walter Johnson
d. Johnny Sain

ANSWERS
THE FIRST FAN: b. Benjamin Harrison, the 23rd president, was the first to attend a major league game. He saw the Reds beat the Senators 7–4 in a National League game at Boundary Park on June 6, 1892.
HE'S NOT GAME: Jimmy Carter never threw out a first pitch during his term in office (1977–81).
CALL TO ORDER: Johnson (four: Taft, Wilson, Harding, Coolidge); Hoiles (three: G.H.W. Bush, Clinton twice); Dempsey (two: both Reagan); Sain (one: Eisenhower)

FROM TOP: HARVARD ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS/DSPICS.COM; TONY SCHAMER; JIM LUZZI; JIM GRANT; JIM LUZZI (2)

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Edited by
KOSTYA KENNEDY AND
B.J. SCHECTER

SI Players

● FIRST PERSON

DEION BRANCH

Patriots Wide Receiver

ON HIS SUPER BOWL MVP TROPHY Today [April 12] is my first day taking it out of the case. I've been traveling, so this is my first full day at home near Foxboro. Not a bad piece of hardware. They even give you special gloves to clean it with.

ON THE POST–SUPER BOWL HOOPLA I've lost track of how many appearances I've done. I don't mind. Just tell me where to go and what time. I did MTV's *TRL* and BET's video countdown show *106 & PARK*. I went on Jay Leno—that was surreal. But my favorite was Regis and Kelly. A guy [Rob Sarofeen] was getting married on the show, and he was a big Patriots fan, so they asked me to come on to surprise him. He was in a wheelchair, paralyzed from a diving accident. We shocked him. I didn't stay for the whole shebang because it was the bride's day. I didn't want to take away from that.

ON HIS SUPER BOWL FAN BASE I had 75 people in Jacksonville. I couldn't get everyone into the game, but I got everyone into the celebration party. My two sisters, Toccara and Trayonia, live in Jacksonville; my little brother, Antonio, came from Georgia; my parents and my grandparents were there. All my mom [Mary] cares about is that I'm healthy, that I get out of the game without breaking anything.

ON HIS TWIN FOUR-YEAR-OLD SONS, DEIONDRE AND DEIONTEY We call them Dre *(below, left)* and Tey *(below, right)*. They were premature, so they were in the hospital [in Louisville, where Branch went to college in 2000 and '01] for a month. They were out of the hospital for six days when Dre contracted spinal meningitis. Germs caused it. It could have been anything. People not washing their hands or someone kissing him. He's doing real good though. He's in a children's nursing home in Louisville, but he should be out soon.

BILL LUSTER (BRANCH AND SONS)

ON SPENDING TIME WITH THEM Their birthday is April 10, and we had a party at the ice rink in Louisville. Tey got me to put on some skates and do a few circles. Their mother, Danyle, and I set up a schedule for the season, but it's hard since Dre can't fly. Tey comes as much as

 PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVEN FREEMAN

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he can, and in the off-season I spend as much time as I can in Louisville. **ON OFFENSIVE COORDINATOR CHARLIE WEIS'S LEAVING FOR NOTRE DAME** We're going to miss him. He had an aggressive style, very demanding. He would tell us he wanted us to succeed almost more than we wanted to succeed. That resonated. I would think, Maybe I'm really not giving it my all. That drives you. **ON BADLY SPRAINING HIS RIGHT KNEE IN THE SECOND GAME LAST YEAR** A freak accident. My teammate Steve Neal was running toward me when someone on Arizona pushed him. I tried to jump, but he caught my leg. I thought it was broken when I hit the ground. It was so quiet in the stadium, and it took a couple seconds to get my air back. I lay there trying to keep my composure, but my knee felt so loose, I knew something was wrong. Steve felt bad. Every time he saw me, he hung his head. But I told him, 'Hey, man, stuff like this is going to happen.' **ON HIS REHAB** The main thing was the mental part. To miss close to eight weeks killed me, but I had support from my teammates and coaches. They convinced me to get the treatment and not to try and come back prematurely. They said that as frustrating as it was, they would need me more later, when it counted. **ON HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS** I tried everything because I didn't want to lift or run with my football coach [William Chunn at Monroe High in Albany, Ga.]. He was a drill sergeant. During the off-season he had the team do so much stuff. I played other sports so I wouldn't have to. He knew track made me faster and I was good in soccer, so he didn't bother me with those. But one year I tried to play tennis. I'm good at Ping-Pong so I'm like, All right, I can try tennis. I was terrible. [Chunn] came and got me the first day and said to start lifting and leave tennis alone. I also went out for baseball once. That lasted a little longer. I think I made it a week. **ON DANCING** Me and my friends were in a dance group all through high school. We danced behind artists at local venues and clubs. We were good. But I can't dance anymore. The bones have stiffened up on me.

—As told to Lisa Altobelli

BRANCH, 25, ONE OF FOUR RECEIVERS TO BE NAMED SUPER BOWL MVP, HAD 11 CATCHES FOR 133 YARDS IN THE PATS' 24–21 WIN OVER THE EAGLES

AL TIELEMANS (BRANCH ACTION); MARC SEROTA/REUTERS (TEJADA); CY CYR/US PRESSWIRE (RAYMOND); BOB ROSATO (SPURRIER); LOUIS J. LOPEZ/BEIMAGES (JONES); BILL FRAKES (O'NEAL)

WHO'S Hot WHO'S Not

Orioles

Having swept the Yanks for the first time in five years, the 8–4 AL East leaders were riding a power-packed lineup their Hall of Fame ex-manager Earl Weaver would have loved. More happy times ahead: Weaver's old minor league club, the Rochester Red Wings, is giving him a bobblehead night on May 14. The doll has a movable leg for kicking dirt on umps.

George Steinbrenner

He's not only hot under the collar—the Boss erupted last week saying he was "bitterly disappointed" by the Yankees' slow start—he's also hot on the trail of a Kentucky Derby win. His colt Bellamy Road is the early favorite for the May 7 race at Churchill Downs.

Steve Spurrier

South Carolina coach is loving life back in college after his 12–20 tenure with the Redskins—and Gamecocks faithful are loving him back. Nearly 39,000 were at last week's intrasquad game. (Usually only 10,000 show up.) Spurrier, 59, to *USA Today*: "I'm sort of a reborn football coach."

Grizzlies

Sure they've struggled lately (four straight losses), but they're in! Team that was 12–17 at Christmas, and reeling from the resignation of coach Hubie Brown, made the postseason for the second straight year.

Devil Rays

Two key players (Roberto Alomar, Danny Bautista) retired in spring training, outfielder Alex Sanchez got suspended for failing a performance-enhancing drug test, and the bad breaks won't end for these 4–8 AL East cellar-dwellers: The woman who plays team mascot Raymond broke her arm and is out six to eight weeks.

Dan Gilbert

Since he took over as Cavs owner on March 1, the once fourth-seeded team has gone 9–16, putting it in playoff peril. Gilbert fired coach Paul Silas and hasn't backed G.M. Jim Paxson. Even if Cavs do sneak in, Gilbert has helped sour the Second Season of LeBron.

Marion Jones

The winner of five medals at the 2000 Olympics finished dead last in the 400 meters at the Mt. San Antonio College Relays. With suspicions of past drug use dogging her, Marion said after the race . . . well, we're not sure. She refused to speak to reporters.

Gonzalezes

The Indians' Juan languishes on the DL, the D-Backs' Luis is cooling off, the Marlins' Alex is three for his last 19, the Pirates' Mike has given up four runs in six innings, and the Devil Rays' Alex plays for the Devil Rays.

CORRECTION In last week's issue an item about *Detroit Free Press* reporter Mitch Albom's fabricating a scene in his column on Michigan State's Final Four game said that Albom "wasn't even in St. Louis." Albom—who concedes that the scene was fabricated—was in fact at the game in St. Louis. We regret the error.

SI PLAYERS POLL

Based on a survey of 227 NBA players

For complete results and a breakdown of the poll go to SI.com/scorecard.

If you could pick one player to build a team around, whom would it be?

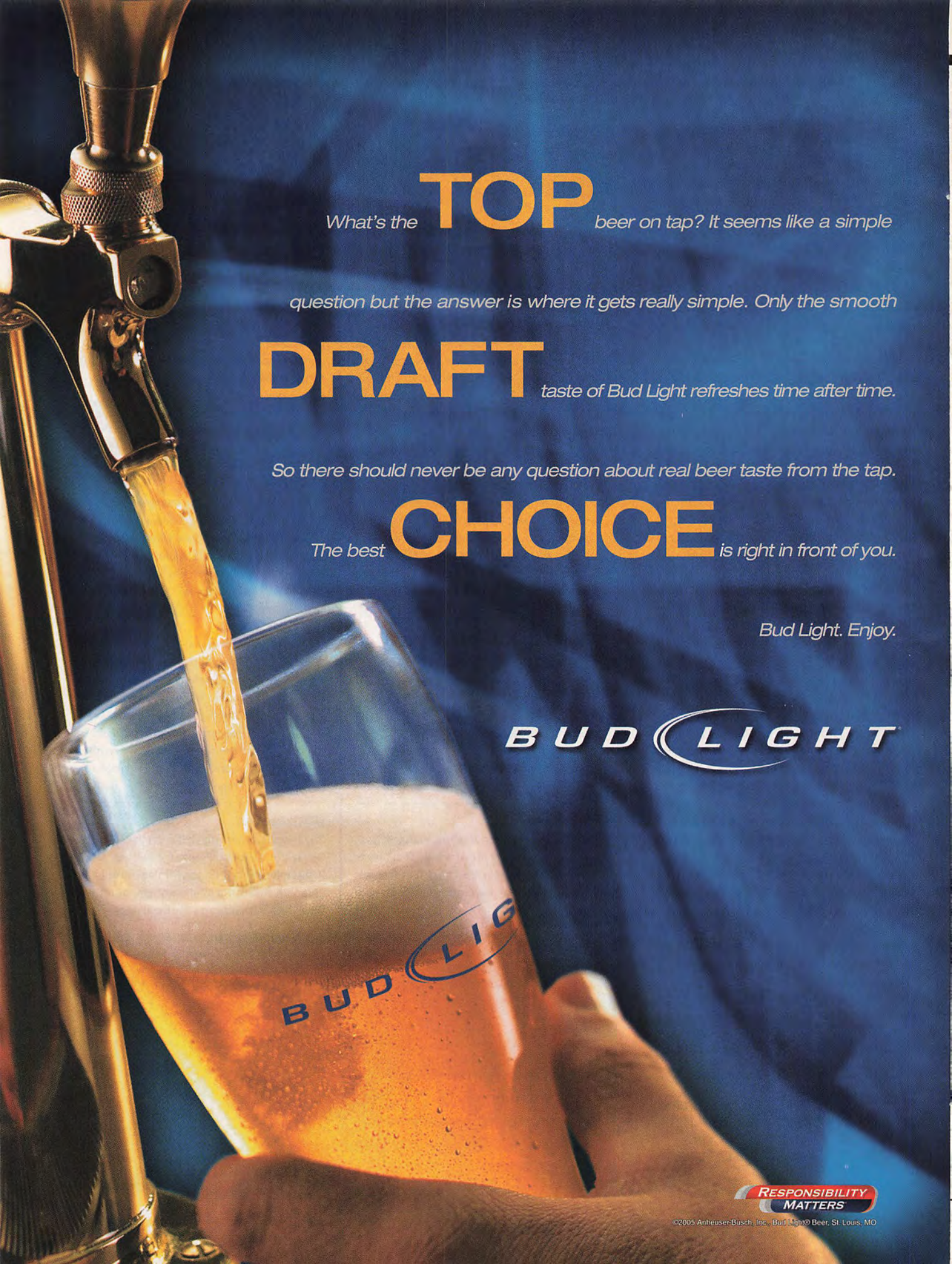
Shaquille O'Neal . . 35%
Heat center

Kevin Garnett 27%
T-Wolves forward

Tim Duncan 16%
Spurs forward

LeBron James 15%
Cavs forward

FAST FACTS: Kobe Bryant, Steve Nash and Amare Stoudemire were the only other players to draw multiple votes. . . . As rookies, the top four vote-getters helped improve their respective team's record by an average of 20 wins.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MEET MR. SMARTY-PANTS

AT THE NFL combine Harvard quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick's 4.07 seconds in the 20-yard short shuttle run was second best among QBs, but his most eye-opening statistic was nine minutes. That's how long he took to complete the 50-question intelligence exam most prospects fail to finish in the allotted 12 minutes. His swift time on the Wonderlic Personnel Test resulted in a score of 38, double the mean.

"Wonderlic measures the ability to sort through information quickly," says an NFL source. The 6' 3", 232-pound Fitzpatrick, a likely late-round pick, had a 3.2 GPA as an economics major and led Harvard to a 10–0 record with his 2,434 total yards. He played in January's East-West Shrine Game. "My nickname there was Harvard," he says. "I was expected to know everything." But Fitzpatrick's agent, Kyle Rote Jr., says there can be a drawback to being Mr. Smarty: "One [NFL] quarterback coach told me jokingly, 'I can't have a player who knows the playbook better than I do.' "

—Ben Reiter

• WHO'S WHO?

Double Alex

If you get them mixed up on draft day, you won't be the first

ALEX SMITH
Stanford TE
The 6' 5" 255-pounder set school records with 107 career catches, 1,291 yards. Second team All-America; third-rounder.

ALEX SMITH
Utah QB
The 6' 4" 212-pounder led Utes to a 12–0 2004 season and threw for 5,203 career yards. Heisman nominee; first-rounder.

BORN	May 22, 1982; raised: Denver	May 7, 1984; raised: La Mesa, Calif.
NICKNAME	Smitty	Doogie Howser
PEDIGREE	Father, Ed, played DE for the Broncos in the 1970s.	Uncle John L. Smith coaches Michigan State.
SISTER ACT	Danielle, 20, throws shot put and discus at UCLA.	Abbey, 26, played soccer at Cal State–Northridge; Mackenzie, 18, is now a soccer star at UC Davis.
YOUTH FOOTBALL	Parents forbade Alex to play tackle football until his teens. At Mullen High he played WR and TE, won a state title and was named an All-America; also all-state in basketball.	Parents forbade him to play organized football until eighth grade. At Helix High, he started on the freshman team, then went 25–1 in his last two varsity years; class president as a senior.
MISTAKEN IDENTITY	"At the NFL combine the physician looked at my X-rays and said there was something going on with my back. That was strange; I've never had a problem. They sent me to have MRIs done, which took hours. Then later I remembered that [Utah's Alex Smith] had a little back trouble. I met him [at the combine] and told him, and we laughed about it."	On ESPN.com last month "there was supposed to be a chat with Alex Smith, and on the home page there were pictures of me saying, 'You can talk with a possible Number I draft pick.' They didn't contact me about it; they contacted him. He was the one answering questions, but all the questions were directed toward me. They screwed up bad." *—Amanda Cherrin*

• SOON-TO-BE ROOKIE'S DIARY

Waiting for *That* Call

Running back Ronnie Brown helped lead Auburn to a 13–0 record last season, and his draft stock skyrocketed: He's now projected as a top five pick (page 50). *Here he shares his thoughts and experiences with SI Players.*

I'M REALLY excited about the draft. These past couple of months have been crazy with the NFL combine [in late February] and individual workouts, but I feel confident. It helps that Carnell Williams [also a potential top five pick], one of my best friends and a former teammate, was right here at Auburn with me. Every day we lifted weights and went for a run. Then we'd hang out, watch TV and play video games at my apartment. [Brown graduated in May 2004 with a degree in communications.]

I knew I had to step up at the combine because I shared time with Carnell at Auburn and didn't get as many carries as other players. Right after we won the Sugar Bowl in January, I went to Phoenix to train for two months and spent six hours a day lifting and trying to improve my 40 time. I did a lot of squats, power cleans and stretching to improve my flexibility.

Speed was a question about me, but I blew the scouts—and myself—away with my 40 time at the combine. I knew I ran pretty fast when I saw some scouts looking at their stopwatches, shaking their heads. But when they told me I had run a 4.4, I was like, "For real?" I had never run that fast and proved I could really move for a big back [6 feet, 223 pounds].

I've received a lot of attention since the combine, but I'm not letting it get to me. Two weeks ago I had lunch with the Tennessee Titans' coaches, and we talked about plays I could be involved in. That was cool, but I try not to pay attention to where I'll end up. My family is really into all that. My mom calls me every time she sees me on TV. I'm looking forward to taking care of my family [he has an older brother] after I sign my first contract.

I was drafted as a baseball player in 2000 when the Seattle Mariners took me in the 42nd round out of high school in Cartersville, Ga. But I came to Auburn and gave up baseball, and this NFL draft feels very different. Carnell and I have a wager: Whoever gets drafted later has to pick up the tab for a nice dinner.

MICHAEL SEAMANS/BOSTON HERALD (FITZPATRICK HEAD SHOT); SHELLY CASTELLANO/ICON SMI (STANFORD'S SMITH); STEVE C. WILSON/AP (UTAH'S SMITH); EVERETT COLLECTION (DOOGIE HOWSER); JIM ROGASH/WIREIMAGE.COM (FITZPATRICK IN ACTION); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (STANFORD'S SMITH IN ACTION); ROBERT BECK (UTAH'S SMITH IN ACTION); SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IMAGING (NOTEBOOK); DANNY TURNER (BROWN); DAVID E. KLUTHO (BROWN IN ACTION)

PLAYING ALONG

Raptor For a Day

On assignment for SI, a novelist got a crash course in the NBA

By Michael Grant Jaffe

Bonner (right) gave Jaffe pointers—to little avail.

• OPTIONAL WORKOUT (10:04 A.M.) "You're late. We start at 10," says assistant coach Jim Todd as I wander out. "I hope you don't mind being fined." He's kidding, I think. I'm 6' 5", but I'm 40 and haven't played organized hoops since high school. During the shootaround, forward Matt Bonner sees a defect in my release: I'm holding the ball against the heel of my hand instead of my fingertips. The other players watch, snickering, as he guides me through a drill to improve my form. Says Bonner with a smile, "We usually do this with 10-year-olds."

How to win? Film at five!

A visit to the ice man

• MEDICAL TREATMENT (12:15 P.M.) I have a sore right thumb that trainer Greg Spratt diagnoses as a sprain. I don't tell him I got the injury helping my daughters build a Harry Potter clubhouse in our yard.

• FILM SESSION (4:53 P.M.) We gather on the practice court to break down film. I sit between Bonner and guard Omar Cook, behind Jalen Rose. We watch Pacers guard Reggie Miller slither around a series of picks before sinking a jumper. "He's gonna do a lot of catfighting to get free," says coach Sam Mitchell. When the 15-minute video ends, Todd leads us in a walk-through of offensive sets. Says Mitchell, "The farther away from the basket you force [Pacers forward Dale] Davis, the better."

• PREGAME (6:20 P.M.) I stand beneath the backboard feeding loose balls to Bonner and forward Chris Bosh until the team breaks into two lines for a shooting drill. "Get in there," Todd tells me. I meekly follow swingman Morris Peterson; Cook pats my back. Thousands watch as I dribble and launch my shot from 12 feet out. I'm so nervous, I can barely feel my limbs. The ball is shot-putted from my hand—I've forgotten Bonner's tips. Mercifully, it grazes the rim. Moving to the back of the line, I see two guys in the stands paging through the game program, looking for . . . me? My second shot feels perfect. It hits the rim and ricochets over the top of the backboard.

• GAME TIME (6:50 P.M.) In the corridor we "get our stretch on," as guard Milt Palacio says. Guard Rafer Alston says earnestly, "You gotta lead us out there." No chance, I say. We run onto the floor; I'm among the last. The roar of 15,000 fans sounds like cannon blasts. I stumble as I take my seat beside the bench. We lead for much of the game, players chattering encouragement to one another. Palacio engages in an ongoing swap of good-natured insults with Pacers guard Stephen Jackson. Once, when forward Eric Williams goes in, I snag some gum from a pack under his chair. At halftime, tied, we drink Gatorade in the locker room while the coaches huddle and amend the game plan. "Did you see me get hit in the face [by Miller]?" asks Peterson. "They didn't call a thing." I nod, indignant at the officiating.

• POSTGAME (9:56 P.M.) Bonner misses a shot that might have sent the game into OT, and we lose 94–90. Security guards clear a path to the locker room. Everyone's tired. The subdued players shower, then pick chicken sandwiches off a buffet spread. In an hour the Raptors will fly to New York. Peterson sidles up to me. "You coming with us?" he asks. "No," I say, "this is the end of the line for me."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID BERGMAN

Take me fishing.
Because I get the giggles
when the boat bounces.

Take me fishing.
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work later.

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really aren't that icky.

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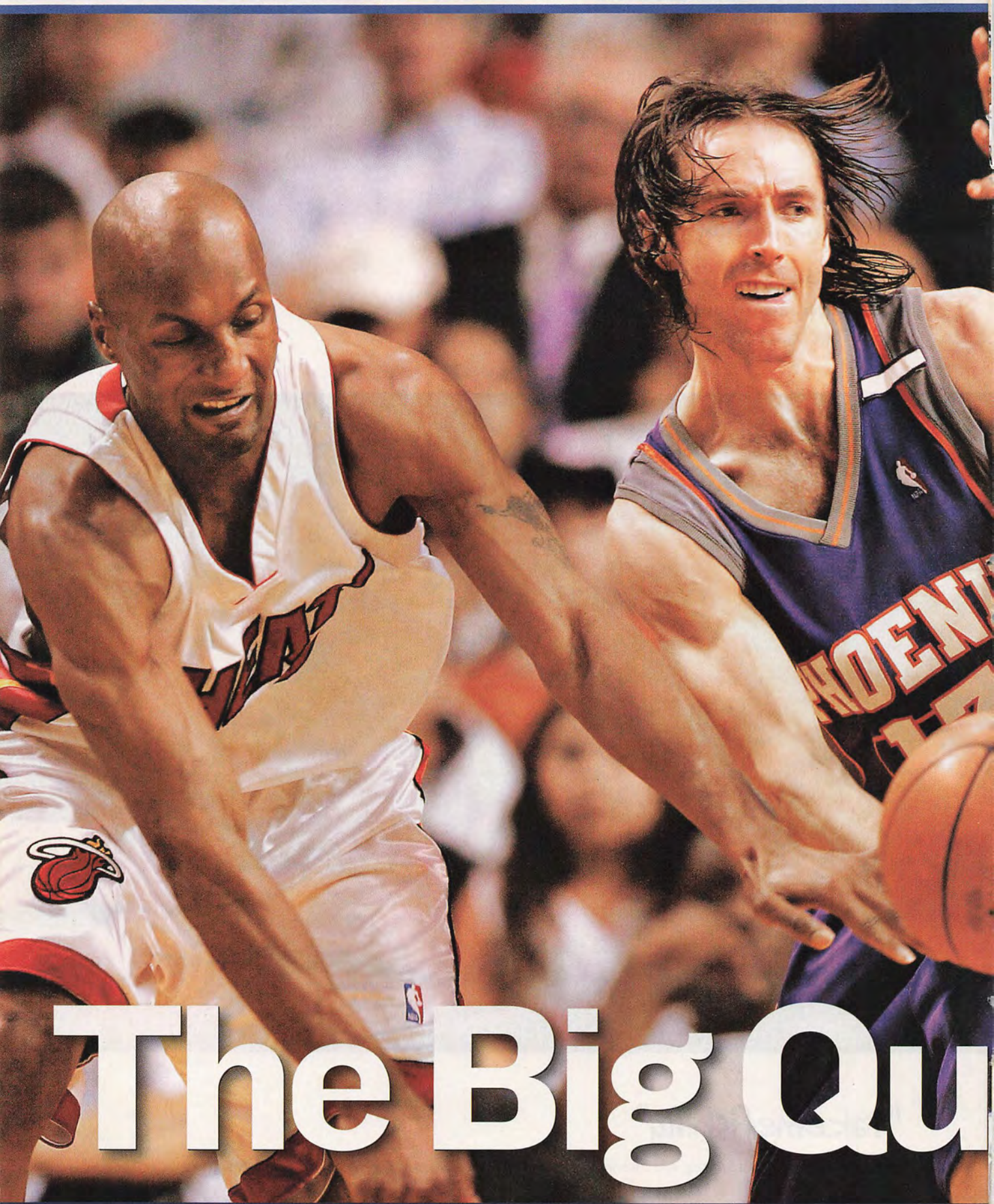
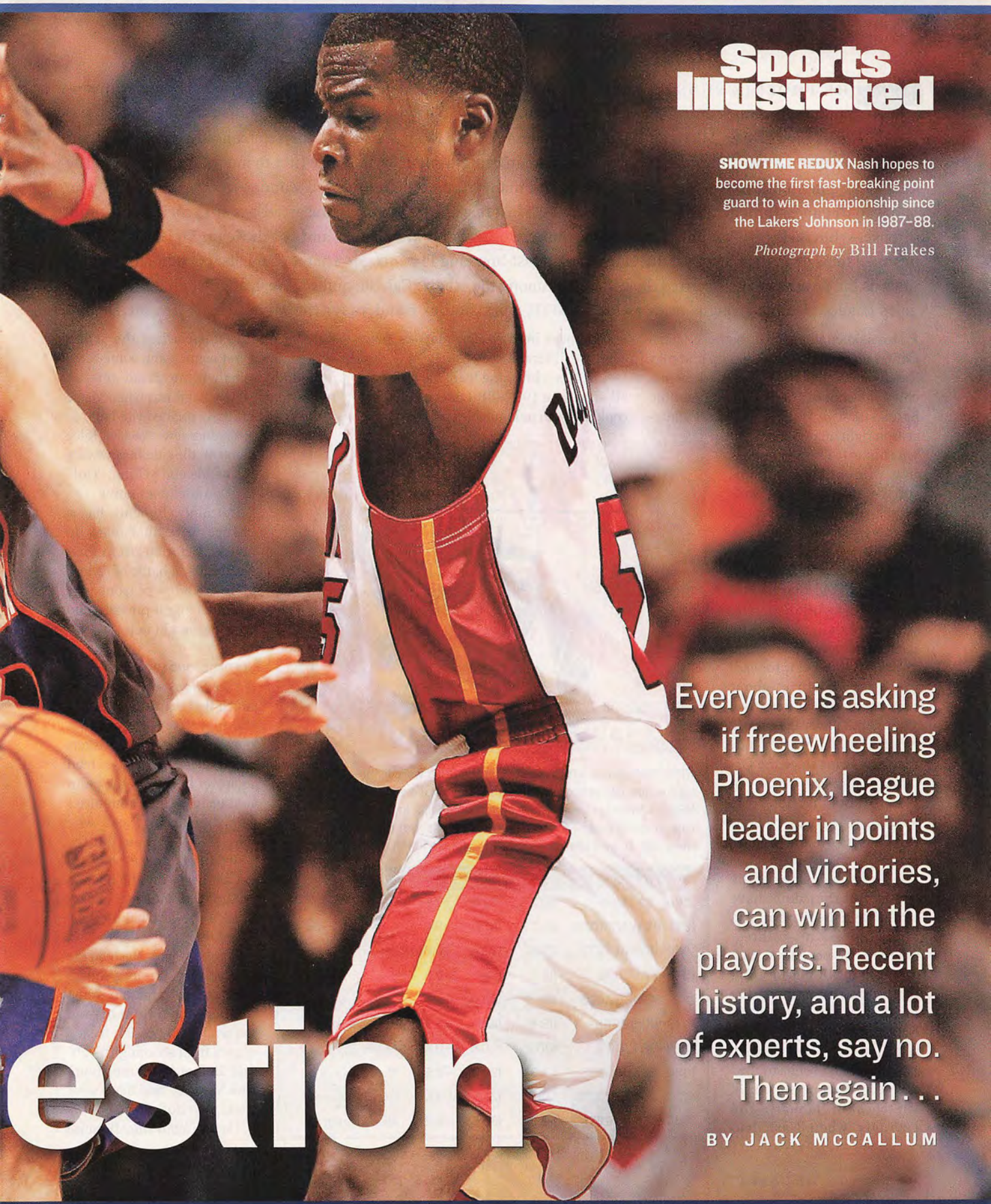


The Big Qu



Sports Illustrated

SHOWTIME REDUX Nash hopes to become the first fast-breaking point guard to win a championship since the Lakers' Johnson in 1987–88.

Photograph by Bill Frakes

estion

Everyone is asking if freewheeling Phoenix, league leader in points and victories, can win in the playoffs. Recent history, and a lot of experts, say no. Then again . . .

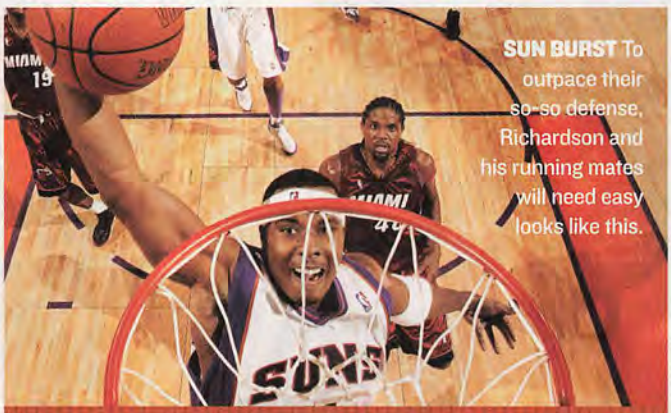
BY JACK MCCALLUM

THE PHOENIX SUNS began the season as a nullity, quickly evolved into a novelty and wound up winning more games than any other NBA team. Into a likely first-round matchup against the Memphis Grizzlies they take an MVP candidate in point guard Steve Nash, a Coach of the Year candidate in Mike D'Antoni and a Most Improved Player candidate in center Amaré Stoudemire (not to mention a Blogger of the Year candidate in offbeat forward Paul Shirley). Yet many around the league still wonder whether the Suns, who had won 61 games through Sunday after going 29–53 last season, are too much the arrivistes, with their full-throttle offense—"blitzkrieg basketball," Minnesota Timberwolves general manager and coach Kevin McHale calls it—destined to fizzle in the playoffs. ¶ Just how far can fast-breaking Phoenix go? That tops the list of compelling questions as the postseason gets started this Saturday. Among the others: Can Shaquille O'Neal, after leading the Los Angeles Lakers to three straight titles as Finals MVP, work similar wonders for the Miami Heat? Are the Detroit Pistons, seeded second in the Eastern Conference, ready to tighten up and play the disciplined style that earned them a championship in 2004? Will San Antonio Spurs star Tim Duncan shake off a late-season right ankle sprain and win his third ring (and his first without David Robinson)? Can one of the dark horses—the Dallas Mavericks or the Houston Rockets in the West, the adversity-tested Indiana Pacers in the East—conquer a field that lacks a prohibitive favorite?

Despite their record, the Suns are not generally viewed as the team to beat. Indeed, for every positive about Phoenix there's a negative. The Suns average more points (110.2 at week's end) than any team since the Orlando Magic's 110.9 in 1994–95. But they don't play lock-down defense. The Suns run better, off makes and misses, than any team since the Showtime Lakers of the 1980s. But they don't have a reliable half-court attack. The Suns had more three-pointers (9.6 per game) than any team in NBA history. But they also attempted the third-most threes (24.6) in NBA history, and their shot selection was often suspect. Phoenix hasn't been stopped all year, except for brief stretches in January and February when Nash had leg and back injuries. The playoffs, however, are different.

A true fast-breaking team hasn't won it all since the 1987–88 Lakers, and they could go to an indomitable half-court force, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, when the action slowed down. Yet some team, some time, is bound to change the paradigm—or, rather, return it to what it was when Magic Johnson relentlessly pushed the ball (as Nash does now) and Pat Riley stood on the sidelines waving his hands and yelling, "Go!" (as D'Antoni does now).

Certainly, Phoenix has a chance to be that team, to emerge victorious from what Nash calls "a battle of styles." Here are a few reasons why the Suns might prevail—and why they might not.



SUN BURST To outpace their so-so defense, Richardson and his running mates will need easy looks like this.

Every Game a Shootout

WITH TWO games left in the season the Suns were leading the league not only in scoring but also in points allowed. Since the 1976 NBA-ABA merger, none of the other nine teams that topped both categories advanced to the conference finals. But then, none of them had an average margin of victory close to Phoenix's.

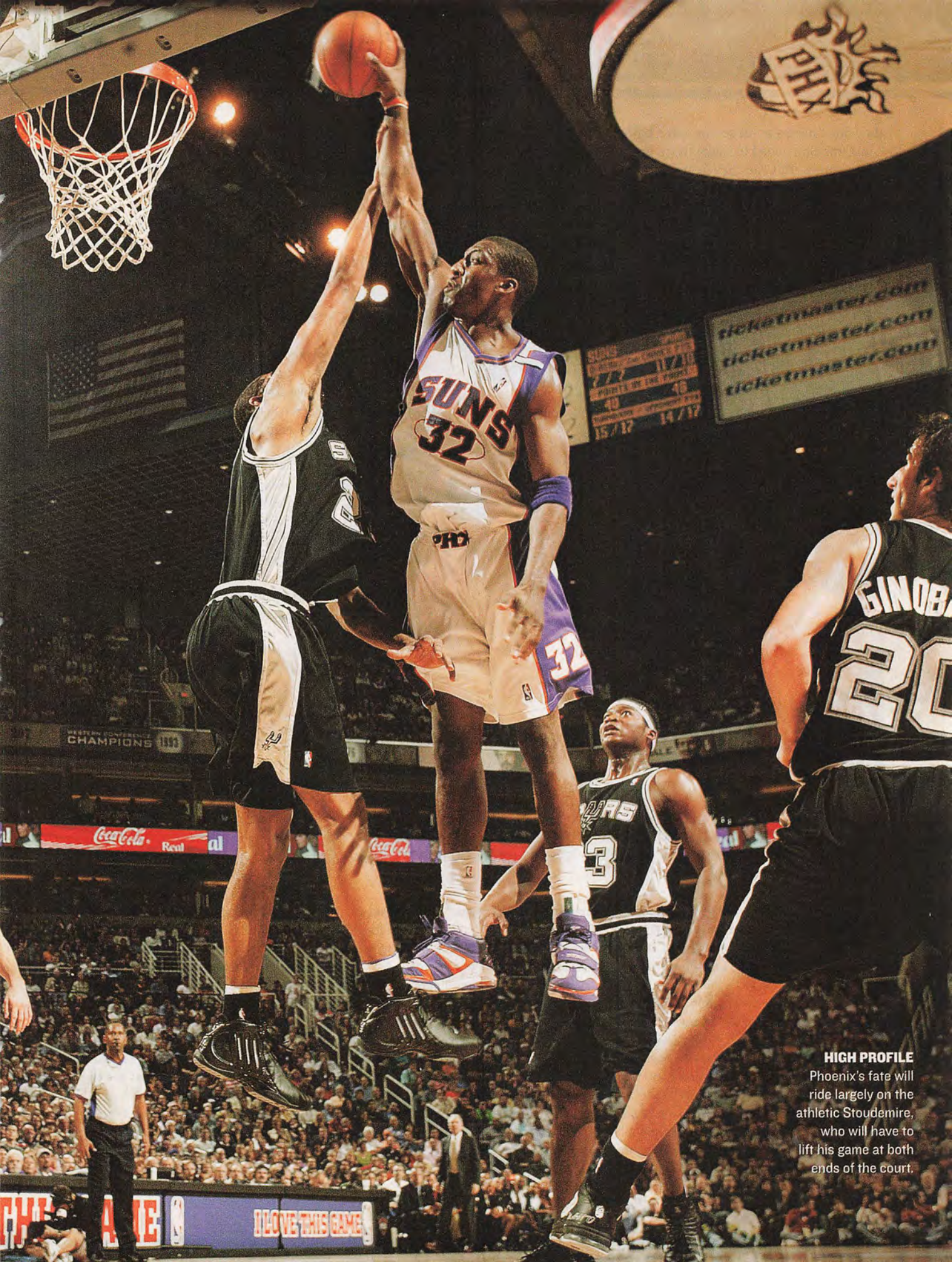
TEAM	PPG SCORED	PPG ALLOWED	DIFF.	PLAYOFF RESULT
2004–05 SUNS	110.2	102.8	+7.4	———
1991–92 WARRIORS	118.7	114.8	+3.9	*Lost in first round*
1982–83 NUGGETS	123.2	122.6	+0.6	*Lost in Western semis*
1976–77 SPURS	115.0	114.4	+0.6	*Lost in first round*
1981–82 NUGGETS	126.5	126.0	+.5	*Lost in first round*
1979–80 SPURS	119.4	119.7	–0.3	*Lost in first round*
1998–99 KINGS	100.2	100.6	–0.4	*Lost in first round*
1980–81 NUGGETS	121.8	122.3	–0.5	*Missed playoffs*
1983–84 NUGGETS	123.7	124.8	–1.1	*Lost in first round*
1990–91 NUGGETS	119.9	130.8	–10.9	*Missed playoffs*

THEIR SECONDARY BREAK

On the Sunny side: It's not so much that teams can't run in the playoffs; it's more that they seldom get easy baskets when they do. Defenses tend to sprint back into the paint in transition, then administer punishment to those who dare seek a gimme. But the Suns' break doesn't have to get all the way to the hoop to be successful; their secondary break is the best in the league. All of their starters can stop and pop. Or with Nash on the dribble, they can run a superb pick-and-roll for an open jumper—often from beyond the arc. "It's impossible to stop a team from shooting 18-, 20- and 25-footers in transition," says McHale, "and that's what those guys do."

On the cloudy side: Because

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (STOUDEMIRE); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (RICHARDSON)



HIGH PROFILE
Phoenix's fate will ride largely on the athletic Stoudemire, who will have to lift his game at both ends of the court.

they don't have a go-to scorer in the halfcourt, the Suns need to make those transition threes. But can they keep up their long-range accuracy (39.2%, best in the league)? Small forward Quentin Richardson, who through Sunday had made a franchise-record 219 three-pointers while attempting a franchise-record 610, is a notorious streak shooter. If he misses his first one or two, he may clang 10 in a row—and even that won't stop him from firing away.

THEIR PEERLESS LEADER

On the Sunny side: Phoenix has an unshakable belief in Nash, akin to how the Lakers felt about Magic. "Steve will find a weakness in the defense and do whatever is necessary," says 6' 7" power forward Shawn Marion. "That's the way we've been doing it all year." And though there has been much talk about his wearing down, the 6' 3", 195-pound Nash said last week that he's feeling fine. "In many ways it's easier to [stay fresh] in

SHAQOLYTE O'Neal's new best bud, Jones is among the most reliable playmakers and accurate long-range shooters in the league.

He's the Key. Just Ask Him

When Miami needs a locker room boost or late-game trey, it can count on **Damon Jones**, who seldom lets his game do the talking

AN HOUR before the Heat tipped off against the Sixers in Philadelphia last week, Miami point guard Damon Jones was already providing running commentary—on the action in the locker room. Loudly and enthusiastically he ribbed passing teammates, called out their nicknames (backup guard Keyon Dooling is "Sammy" because Jones thinks he looks like Sammy Davis Jr.), touted Shaquille O'Neal for MVP to any reporter who would listen ("I'm *baffled* that there is even a discussion," Jones said) and, while seated next to reserve forward Qyntel Woods, decided it was never too soon to wax nostalgic. "Just me and Q," Jones said wistfully, putting his arm around Woods, "reminiscing about those cheesesteaks we had earlier this afternoon."

Whether firing one-liners or three-pointers, Jones, a seven-year veteran, is the unsung spark plug of the team favored to come out of the Eastern Conference. "Damon being a very upbeat guy has been important," says coach Stan Van Gundy. "I tend to be very tough and very negative; he gives our locker room some positive energy and light."

What Jones doesn't bring to the locker room is humility. He calls himself "the best-looking man on the team" and the "funniest person in the NBA—and the world!" At least he's more realistic about his job on the court. "We're going to give the ball to Shaq and let him dictate the majority of the offense, then we're going to get the ball to [shooting guard Dwyane] Wade," says Jones. "People like me just fit in where we fit in."

Such willingness to play a role was exactly what Miami was looking for when it signed Jones to a one-year, $2.5 million free-agent contract last August. The team needed a playmaker who could serve as a butler: bring the ball up, then cordially present it to O'Neal or Wade. "We wanted a guy who didn't turn it over much, who could run our offense, make entry passes and make shots," says Van Gundy. The 28-year-old Jones has provided impeccable service. At week's end his assists-to-turnover ratio was 3.56 to 1 (fourth in the NBA), he was averaging a career-high 11.8 points, and he'd hit a franchise-record 221 threes on 43.5% accuracy (fourth in the league). No one else in the top 10 in accuracy was within 100 attempts of him; more than two thirds of his shots have come from behind the arc.

Jones is among the slower playmakers in the NBA, and when he launches from long range, he has so little lift that he looks as if he's playing Pop-a-Shot. Yet with the Heat's two stars drawing such extensive attention from defenses, Jones has had no problem getting open looks. Early in the season he would celebrate each triple he hit by raising the last three fingers of either hand for all to see. But Van Gundy found the gesture too provocative and told him to cut it out. "No big deal," Jones says. "I'm a basketball player first and an entertainer second."

Jones's road to point man on a title contender has been long, but his confidence seldom has been shaken. He left Houston in 1997,

BILL FRAKES (LEFT); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

the playoffs because there are no back-to-backs," he said.

Even if Nash, who signed a six-year, $60 million free-agent contract in the off-season, doesn't win the league MVP award (he's in a neck-and-neck race with Shaq), the Canadian Kid is having a truly magical season. Remember how a generation of youngsters began drying their sweaty hands by wiping them along the soles of their sneakers because Larry Bird did it? Watch how many budding point guards begin making an exaggerated shooting motion before launching a free throw, and licking their fingers between dribbles. (Nash even does that while leading the break.) As far as copying Nash's moppish hair style? Not a good idea.

On the cloudy side: If teams contain Nash—or if he gets hurt in one of his headlong dashes up the court—Phoenix is doomed. He not only sets up his teammates (a league-leading 11.5 assists per game, the highest average since 1994–95) but also has an underappreciated ability to create his own shot in the half-court. The widely accepted plan for dealing with Nash is to let him fire away rather than allow him to penetrate and dish to streak shooters such as Richardson and sixth man Jimmy Jackson. "When we played Dallas in the playoffs two years ago [Nash was with the Mavericks then], we focused on trying to make Nash finish at the basket instead of letting his teammates get into the game," says Portland Trail Blazers guard Damon Stoudamire. "If Nash scores 40, it means nobody else is getting the ball."

THEIR PRECOCIOUS PIVOT

On the Sunny side: The Suns' athleticism is best exemplified by Stoudemire, their 6' 10" marvel of quickness and leaping ability who, in the words of Blazers interim coach Kevin Pritchard, "runs like a guard and can get out in front of the posse." Though Stoudemire and Marion regularly give away inches and pounds at the five and the four, respectively, they are capable of beating their opposite numbers down the floor on every possession—a trait shared by Phoenix's other starters. That has allowed the Suns to increase their scoring by 16.0 points per game over last year, the biggest jump in the shot-clock era. "Amaré is big, strong and so athletic, and Nash finds him and gets the ball to him," says Portland forward Shareef Abdur-Rahim. "How can they miss with that combination?"

On the cloudy side: Partly because Nash is a veteran of six playoff series and wise beyond his 31 years, Phoenix's playoff inexperience is often discounted. Not, however, by Shirley, whose blog of a recent road trip for the team's website—funny and candid by the standards of the typical "inside look"—got extensive attention from the national press. "I see [us] going through the same struggles as any team that is new to success, especially one with such young personnel," wrote the much-traveled Shirley, who has scored a total of 31 points in three NBA seasons. "I see players who might be starting to believe what they read about themselves and who are beginning to become convinced of their own importance."

Shirley did not name names, but he may have been referring to one of his poker-playing buds, the 22-year-old Stoudemire. Even though he was tied for fifth in the NBA in free throw attempts at week's end (9.9 per game), Stoudemire frequently barks at the refs when he doesn't get a call and then is often late getting back on defense. He also shows his frustration when the game turns physical

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

GOING APE Fired up by the Gorilla at home (LIFE OF REILLY, page 74), Phoenix has burned up the league on the road too.

after his junior season, despite being advised by pro scouts to stay in school, went undrafted, then spent the next year kicking around the USBL and the IBA. During 1998–99 he tied a CBA record by getting called up to the NBA three times in one season. In seven years he has made nine NBA stops. "I never brag and boast about what I've done as a player," says Jones, who promptly does so. "But my last two situations, the guys that have played off-guard with me have been All-Stars, [the Bucks'] Michael Redd and Dwyane."

Jones stops short of takings credit for O'Neal's success, instead saying that Shaq took his game from "an eight to a 15, and the scale only goes to 10." That may explain Jones's devotion to the big man. He exits the bus on Shaq's heels, wears the same brand of sneakers and even got whistled for a technical seconds after O'Neal got one in a January game. The 6' 3" Jones is so comfortable as a sidekick that teammates call him Donkey (to Shaq's Shrek) or Lil' Him. "I've always made it a tradition to be good friends with the shooters on the court," says O'Neal, who calls Jones his best friend in the league. "Off the court he's a funny guy, and laughing relieves a lot of stress." Upon seeing Jones in an outfit with a Latin flair, Shaq began salsa-dancing in the locker room and humming a song by the Miami Sound Machine.

Jones laughs off his nicknames, then turns serious about what he has learned from Shaq. "I never shy away from knowledge, and he's been there and he's done it," Jones says. "Anything he can say about how to approach this or that, I'm going to listen."

In Miami it's a novel concept: Damon Jones with his mouth shut. —*Chris Ballard*

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by committing silly fouls. Rest assured that teams will look to muscle up and show no *amore* to Amaré.

THEIR UNDERESTIMATED D

On the Sunny side: While they can hardly be lumped with stalwart defensive teams such as San Antonio and Detroit, the Suns play excellent team D, an extension of the share-the-wealth philosophy they demonstrate on offense. D'Antoni spends much of practice on help drills and relies extensively on double- and triple-teaming during games. At 6' 7", Joe Johnson is a decent stopper who can cool off guards and forwards, and Marion is a wild-card defender, able to help in the middle, close out on three-point shooters and still get a defensive rebound.

On the cloudy side: Phoenix has shown signs of defensive complacency in recent weeks. "At the beginning of the season we didn't know how good we could be, so we got down and guarded people," says Nash. "Then, suddenly, we have this great record,

Uttered Nonsense

In the heat of the playoffs, there's no telling what players will say—or how often their quotes will come back to haunt them

HOTLY CONTESTED games, drawn-out series, media searching for sound bites—that's the inflammable mix that prompts NBA players to shoot off their mouths in the postseason. Sometimes they do it unintentionally, their words often winding up on the bulletin board in an opponent's locker room. Other times they partake in verbal gamesmanship, hoping a well-placed quote will fire up teammates or unsettle the opposition. Here are some of the mouthy maneuvers to listen for.

• ***The Victory Guarantee*** Preferred by brash types for motivational fodder, though it often creates undue pressure on the speaker: Last season Pistons forward Rasheed Wallace promised a win over the Pacers in Game 2 of the conference finals, then shot 4 for 19. (Tayshaun Prince bailed him out with a timely block in Detroit's victory.) *Most likely guarantors:* Wallace, Gary Payton, Tracy McGrady.

• ***The Needle*** Masters of the art will find an opponent's weakness and harp on it. While he was a Laker, Shaquille O'Neal referred to the Kings as the Queens, highlighting their reputation for softness. Attempts to retaliate—"If the Lakers don't have home court advantage, they're not going to win [the series]," Sacramento center Vlade Divac said in 2002—were used as motivational fodder by L.A. In the case of that quote, someone (probably Phil Jackson) taped it to Shaq's locker. *Most likely needlers:* O'Neal, Danny Fortson, Ray Allen.

• ***The Dis Miss*** Is there anything worse than when a put-down backfires? After Game 6 of a 2003 series Trail Blazers forward Ruben Patterson said he thought the Mavericks were "a little scared now." Upon winning Game 7, Dallas coach Don Nelson said, "Thank you, Ruben, for being dumber than a rock and helping us." *Most likely dissers:* Ricky Davis, Gilbert Arenas, Bonzi Wells.

• ***The Faux Furor*** Pat Riley was notorious for turning innocuous quotes into fighting words, even showing them on an overhead projector before games. "Coaches always—*always*—tell you not to throw gasoline on the fire," says Timberwolves center Ervin Johnson. "They'll say, 'Be careful what you say because we've got to play this team again.' " Often those same coaches then scan the papers to find something innocuous to incite their own teams. *Most likely dramatists:* Doc Rivers, Jeff Van Gundy, George Karl.

Then there are those who see no benefit to verbal sparring. "If [players] need that to motivate them and it's the playoffs," says Bulls forward Antonio Davis, "they're in trouble already." —C.B.

SPEAK EASY Wallace's victory guarantee only made the Pistons' job more difficult.

JOHN BIEVER (WALLACE); BOB ROSATO (DAMPIER)

It's About Time!

AMONG THOSE assured of making their postseason debuts this weekend, the Mavericks' Erick Dampier *(above)* should be the happiest. Before landing with a contender in Dallas, the 29-year-old center began his NBA career with the Pacers in 1996–97—the only season of the last 16 that Indiana missed the playoffs—then spent seven years with the woeful Warriors. Here are the active players who, at week's end, had logged the most regular-season games before reaching the postseason.

PLAYER, CURRENT TEAM	REGULAR-SEASON GAMES
ERICK DAMPIER, *Mavericks*	554
JASON TERRY, *Mavericks*	482
DANNY FORTSON, *Sonics*	402
MOOCHIE NORRIS, *Rockets*	398
QUENTIN RICHARDSON, *Suns*	358
BRENDAN HAYWOOD, *Wizards*	287
KEYON DOOLING, *Heat*	275
GILBERT ARENAS, *Wizards*	262
TYSON CHANDLER, *Bulls*	260
KWAME BROWN, *Wizards*	251

and we stopped taking defense as seriously. Our biggest challenge in the playoffs is to get back our defensive intensity."

Further, Stoudemire may be, as one coach who desired anonymity puts it, "one of the 10 worst defenders in the league." He partly masks his deficiencies with shot blocking, but his court awareness is poor; he rarely shades off his man to offer help, even on the strong side. That tendency, if not corrected, could be exploited in the playoffs.

But perhaps this is the year that defense won't matter all that much, and the postseason will be owned by the team that, as Shirley writes, "is a test case for a return to the 1980s' Celtics-Lakers style." His coach is all too ready for the Suns to take that test. "About a million times over the last few months I've heard the question, Can your style win in the playoffs?" D'Antoni said last week. "I don't know the answer. But I can tell you this: I'm relieved that we're about to get one." □

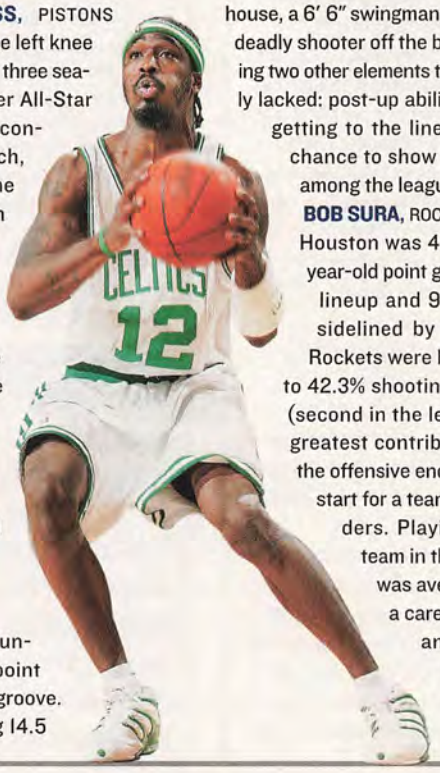
Right Place, Right Time

They haven't commanded the spotlight, but five players are positioned to play major roles in their teams' postseason fates

THERE'S A common denominator among these veterans: They all have something to prove. Which ones will come through when it matters most?

RICKY DAVIS *(below)*, CELTICS Though coach Doc Rivers keeps him on a short leash, taking him out whenever his shooting or emotions veer out of control, the 6′ 7″ swingman is a contender for the Sixth Man Award. Davis's instant offense (16.1 points in 33.0 minutes per game) could help Boston make noise in the second round; if he gets carried away and turns the playoffs into a one-on-one tournament, he could expose the Celtics to an opening-round upset.

ANTONIO MCDYESS, PISTONS After undergoing three left knee surgeries the previous three seasons, the 6′ 9″ former All-Star has been a reliable contributor off the bench, spelling either of the Wallaces (center Ben or forward Rasheed). McDyess, 30, will not only have to rebound and play solid D but also provide more scoring than he did in the regular season (9.7 points through Sunday) because Detroit's bench lacks the punch it had last year.

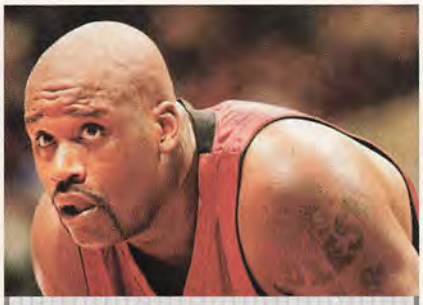


ANDRE MILLER, NUGGETS Denver is the West's scariest underdog because its point guard has found his groove. Miller was averaging 14.5 points (53.7% shooting) and 9.7 assists in April, and his assists-to-turnover ratio was a sterling 3.23 to 1. Since signing a six-year, $51 million free-agent deal with the Nuggets in 2003, Miller has watched the spotlight fall on Carmelo Anthony, Kenyon Martin and coach George Karl—even his backup, 5′ 5″ Earl Boykins, has gotten more attention. But don't underestimate Miller's value: Critics may deride his conservative play, but it should serve Denver well in the postseason.

JERRY STACKHOUSE, MAVERICKS During its 2003 run to the Western finals, Dallas depended heavily on the marksmanship of reserve guard Nick Van Exel. This year Stackhouse, a 6′ 6″ swingman, will have to be the deadly shooter off the bench while providing two other elements the Mavs have sorely lacked: post-up ability and a knack for getting to the line. At 30, he has a chance to show that he still ranks among the league's elite scorers.

BOB SURA, ROCKETS At week's end Houston was 40–19 with the 32-year-old point guard in the starting lineup and 9–12 when he was sidelined by a bad back. The Rockets were holding opponents to 42.3% shooting through Sunday (second in the league), but Sura's greatest contribution has been at the offensive end, supplying a jump start for a team loaded with plodders. Playing for his fourth team in three seasons, Sura was averaging 5.2 assists, a career-high 5.5 boards and 10.1 points, his highest output since 2000–01.

—Ian Thomsen



DAMIAN STROHMEYER (DAVIS); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (O'NEAL)

Mo' Motown

SI sizes up the playoffs (bad news, Shaq) and a big deal

1 Though seeded third in the West, the Sonics will lose in the first round, making it even more unlikely that they'll accede to the contract demands of free-agent guard Ray Allen.

2 Power forward Dirk Nowitzki will begin laying the groundwork for his 2006 MVP candidacy by leading the Mavericks to a second-round upset of the top-seeded but less-experienced Suns.

3 After losing to the Pistons in the Finals as a Laker last season, Shaquille O'Neal *(above)* will come up short against Detroit again—this time when the Heat bow in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference finals.

4 The grittier Pistons will upend the Spurs to win their second straight NBA title. An exhausted Larry Brown will then announce he's taking a year off, forcing Detroit to hire a new coach.

5 In the off-season the Timberwolves will put Kevin Garnett on the market rather than try to piece together another expensive supporting cast for him. Potential trade partners will have to take swingman Wally Szczerbiak and point guard Troy Hudson in the deal as well. —I.T.

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HOUSEWARMING Hernandez threw the Nats' first home pitch, before a crowd of 45,596 at RFK.

The Vote Is In

And it's a resounding yea as Washington, D.C., falls in love with the Nationals, who are likely to succeed where the Senators twice failed

BY TOM VERDUCCI

Photographs by Mitchell Layton

AFTER THE snipers had come down from the rooftop, the bomb-sniffing dogs had finished with Livan Hernandez's blue Ferrari, the beefy Secret Service agent disguised as a ballplayer in the dugout had changed back into street clothes and the leader of the free world had taken his bulletproof vest and gone home—just down the street, mind you—the Washington Nationals became just another baseball team. Oh the happiness the players and the city derived from what a former first fan, President Warren Harding, famously called normalcy.

"It'll be nice to show up and not be strip-searched," Nationals reliever Joey Eischen said after Washington's 5–3 win over the Arizona Diamondbacks in last Thursday night's rollicking home opener. Then, more seriously, Eischen smiled and said, "We're home. This is home."

The marriage between the Nationals—né Montreal Expos, who were best known in recent years for traveling (and sometimes playing) like Ringling Brothers—and Washington, best known for being first in war, first in peace and last in the league, is a match made in personal-ad heaven.

Single, thirtysomething, divorced baseball team seeks long-term relationship. Turn-ons: outdoors, financial security, cable TV. Turn-offs: small gatherings, clipping coupons, international travel.

Lovelorn Washington, already a two-time loser at the national pastime, with one winning baseball team in the past 52 years (including no franchise whatsoever for the last 34), fell hard and fast. In December the District sealed the engagement by agreeing to spend more than $500 million in public money for a ballpark that is planned to open in 2008 on what is now desolate waterfront property. Since then everyone from politicians to pundits to exurbanites have been scarfing up tickets at a rate that has the Nationals topping 2.5 million in attendance this year and outdrawing their backyard rivals, the Baltimore Orioles. The rush for tickets figures to pick up if the Nats, who were 8–4 and atop the National League East following Sunday's 7–3 win over the Diamondbacks, keep winning.

Unlike its last failure with the expansion Senators, who never attracted even one million fans in any of their 11 seasons, the District has a competitive team and the resources to be a moneyed player at the big league baccarat table. No joke, this time it's for real. Privately, Major League Baseball officials believe that the Nationals have the potential to be among the game's top 10 revenue-generating franchises within four years—bigger even than the Orioles, about 40 miles to the northeast.

"I expect both of them to be payers into the revenue-sharing system," commissioner Bud Selig said last Friday. "And that's certainly one definition of a success."

Dick Bosman, a former Senators pitcher and Orioles pitching coach, said before Thursday's pregame festivities, "Oh, yes, it can be bigger and better than Baltimore. This is the pot at the end of the rainbow."

Nine prospective ownership groups have paid $100,000 in application fees in hopes of buying the club from MLB. The franchise is expected to fetch at least triple the $120 million that the other 29 owners paid for it 38 months ago; those owners will divide the profits. Selig said he hopes to finalize a buyer "by midsummer," though he acknowledged that the sport's timetables on such matters have been infamously elastic. Indeed, general manager Jim Bowden was signed to a contract last winter that expires on April 30; MLB thought at the time that new ownership would be in place by then.

The Nationals are in demand largely because the Washington area bares little resemblance to what it was on Sept. 30, 1971. That night the last game in Senators history ended in a forfeit after hundreds of souvenir-seeking fans, knowing that owner Bob Short was moving the team to Texas, stormed the RFK Stadium field during the final inning. Since then the population of the Washington area has surged from 3.3 million to 5.9 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, ranking it fifth among

Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the nation. The Washington MSA has a population twice the size of the Baltimore MSA and ranks fourth in the U.S. in per capita income. More important, only one MSA with a major league team, San Francisco, has a more affluent population base.

"The disposable income in this market is pretty astounding," says Nationals president Tony Tavares. "All you have to do is look at the housing prices. Everything is hugely expensive. It rivals New York City and San Francisco."

As families migrated to the suburbs, the District itself lost about 25% of its population since the Senators left. The area's spending power is generated by huge private-sector growth in the surrounding counties of Northern Virginia and southwestern Maryland. The local economy relies far less on government jobs and more on private government support industries, such as defense contractors, than it did in 1971.

THE NATIONALS have a season-ticket base of about 22,000, fifth-largest in the majors, according to Bowden. They have already sold about 2 million tickets for their inaugural season—more than the second edition of the Senators (1961–71) sold in their first *four* years combined. RFK, a 1960s multipurpose ballpark slapped thick with new makeup, is easily accessible by the Metro, a subway system with tentacles into the suburbs that was linked to RFK in 1977, six years after the Senators left. The stadium may have a shabby, retro look that brings back memories—absolutely none of them historically significant—for Senators fans, but it lacks the luxury-box revenues that help drive the modern game.

The Nationals expect their 41,000-seat ballpark on the Anacostia River to help bring them into the financial neighborhood of the National League East–rival Atlanta Braves, New York Mets and Philadelphia Phillies. The city intends to veer from the well-traveled path of redbrick, green-seated retro parks with a gleaming structure that is uniquely Washington, perhaps featuring white marble, stone, glass, columns, rotundas and other elements of the neoclassical and Georgian architecture around the city. The iconic dome of the U.S. Capitol, less than a mile away, will loom in clear view beyond leftfield.

"We played the Phillies to open the season, and they have a payroll about $50 million more than ours," said Bowden, who's making do with a $48 million payroll this year, up from $41 million in 2004. "That's tough. If you're not within 10, 15 million dollars of your competitors, it becomes very tough. I think in the future we should be able to have roughly the same kind of payroll as other teams in the East."

The team's annual revenue from local television broadcasts, which were nonexistent in Montreal, will be between $21 million and $25 million under a deal MLB cut to mollify Baltimore Orioles owner Peter Angelos, who owns the baseball broadcast rights in the Baltimore-D.C. area and could have threatened a lawsuit claiming the relocation of the Expos to D.C. would harm his franchise. Angelos will own and operate the regional sports network that will carry Nationals and Orioles games, a tremendous inventory of programming that could bring a windfall of profits. The Nationals, with their fixed fee from the network, will not benefit from its growth. In a co-bylined op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* last week, Washington mayor Anthony A. Williams and District Council member Jack Evans nevertheless praised the Nationals' TV take as better than that of 17 other clubs.

AS WAS EVIDENT last Thursday, the rivalry between the Nationals and the Orioles is likely to be intense on and off the field. When a large group of fans held to Baltimore tradition and belted out a loud *"O!"* during the last stanza of the national anthem, an even larger group shouted them down with boos. One fan hung a banner in the upper deck that read, DEAR ANGELOS, U STINK. SIGNED, EVERYONE.

BELTWAY BOMBERS Castilla and Jose Guillen scored on Nick Johnson's triple during a six-run rally that buried Arizona on Sunday.

JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES

The two clubs are likely to fight over a swath of fans and revenues that could go either way. "If an impact shows up, it will likely be in ticket revenues and [luxury] box sales," Tavares says. "I know that's what [Angelos] fears. I have every confidence that this is a win-win for all fans. But there will be some impact [on the Orioles]. I hope for Peter's sake he isn't hurt too badly."

For now, the Nationals can bask in their flavor-of-the-month popularity, an effect that tends to wear off with new clubs. Three of the past four expansion teams suffered double-digit drops in per-game attendance in their second seasons: the Diamondbacks (16%), the Florida Marlins

(13%) and the Tampa Bay Devil Rays (38%). (The Colorado Rockies' second-year attendance increased by 3%.) But Washington can add to its fan base by playing the kind of scrappy, winning baseball the town hasn't seen for generations.

On Thursday, for instance, after President Bush had opened the new era with a high, hard one from the pitching rubber, the Nationals prevailed primarily because a righthander who had fled oppression in Cuba (Hernandez) threw one-hit ball into the ninth inning and a Mexican national without U.S. voting privileges (Vinny Castilla) smacked a double, a triple and a home run. What a country! The 45,596 fans welcomed their Nats with cheers that made the decks of the old stadium shimmy. Most of the former vagabond Expos had never experienced anything like it.

"Watching them cheer, I got goose bumps," closer Chad Cordero said.

"That was something to see, something I'll never forget," outfielder Ryan Church said. "It was like a World Series."

Though the original Senators, who fled to Minnesota in 1961, played in three World Series (1924, '25 and '33, winning the first), the expansion Senators that followed provided all too few moments of even modest glory. Asked why baseball didn't work in D.C. the last time, Jim Woolsey, 68, a Nats fan at last week's home opener, replied, "The team stunk. Simple as that."

"It's like, how many times are you going to watch a horses--- movie?" says Nats coach Tom McCraw, a '71 Senator. "Maybe twice. Once to check it out and another time when a relative comes to town and you need something to do. After that? Forget it. That's what it was like with the Senators."

Bosman, pressed for the seminal moment in expansion Senators history, recalls Sept. 29, 1969, at RFK. "Last series of the year, and we need a sweep for third place, which was a big deal," he says. "[Manager] Ted Williams brings the lineup out to home plate, and the crowd gives him a standing O. It was the closest I ever saw him come to tipping his cap." There were all of 7,436 people at the game that night, or about as many as were in line for hot dogs at RFK last Thursday. The Senators lost 8–5 and finished in fourth place with 86 wins.

There hasn't been an honest-to-goodness pennant race in D.C. since 1945. Last Thursday, as Church cradled the last out, a fly ball, for the first-place Nats at 9:39 p.m. under a clear, black sky that went on forever, anything seemed possible in the center of the free world, even the sweetness of a playoff chase. For though there was still familiarity in the smells, sounds and rhythm of the game 34 years later, baseball in Washington never before looked quite like this—not this new, not this dreamy. □

Unlike its last failure with the Senators, who never attracted even one million fans in any of their II seasons, THE DISTRICT HAS A COMPETITIVE TEAM and the resources to be a moneyed player at the big league baccarat table. No joke, this time it's for real.

CRUISE CONTROL
Jones, who had 88 runs of 10 or more yards at Arkansas, awed scouts at the combine with his 4.4 speed in the 40.

What's His Game?

The most intriguing prospect in a confounding draft is Matt Jones, a college quarterback with size and speed who might line up at wideout, tight end or H-back. Consider the possibilities

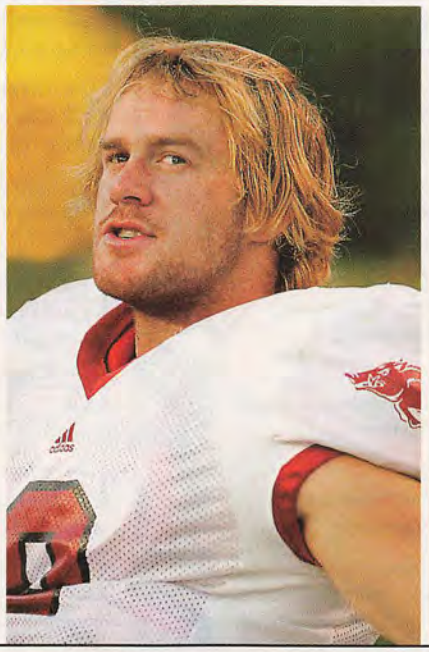
BY PETER KING

Photograph by Chris Livingston/Icon SMI

EIGHT WEEKS ago a tall football player with floppy, blond hair who looked like he could use some sleep stepped to the starting line of the 40-yard dash at the NFL scouting combine. This wasn't one of those guys who stretched and fidgeted and took a bunch of deep breaths before he ran. He got down in his stance, and *boom!* He was gone. The scouts at the finish line barely had time to set their watches before he took off. ¶ "It was funny," recalls Matt Jones, the most intriguing player in an NFL draft that is full of uncertainty. "I'm 6' 6" and 242, and the scouts all asked me what time did I think I was going to run. I told them I ran a 4.41 three weeks ago, and they chuckled. I'm sure most of them thought I'd run a 4.6, maybe a 4.5. But I knew I'd have the adrenaline, and when I was running, I felt like it was the best 40 I ever ran. What better stage to do it on?"

The combine's hand timer clocked Jones at 4.37. The electronic timer showed 4.40. One scout at the finish line also got 4.40, but he figured it had to be wrong, so he turned to a counterpart from another team and asked what he had. "Four-three-eight," came the reply.

Jones, a quarterback at Arkansas, doesn't throw the ball well enough to be a top prospect at that position. He'll probably enter the league as a wide receiver, though if you talk to 10 NFL coaches and general managers, you'll get five or six different answers about where he should play. This much is clear: We haven't seen this type of player come around in a long time. "I've been preparing for drafts since the late '50s," says Gil Brandt, the former Dallas Cowboys player personnel director and now an analyst for NFL.com and Sirius NFL radio, "and there hasn't been a player this big this fast." Of the 129 players at the combine who play the speed positions—wide receiver, running back, defensive back—only seven were electronically timed at under 4.40.



GARY BOGDON

So when the two-day draft begins this Saturday in New York City, one of the biggest questions will be this: Who's bold enough to use a high pick—Jones is likely to be selected sometime between the middle of the first and second rounds—on a guy who, during a four-year college career, had far more dunks playing part time for the basketball team (22) than he had catches for the football team (four)? Change-of-position projections are always difficult; ask the St. Louis Rams, who picked Heisman-winning quarterback Eric Crouch in the third round in 2002 and watched him flounder at receiver.

And what *is* the best position for a guy who has never blocked and rarely made a reception?

"Wide receiver," says Houston Texans offensive coordinator Chris Palmer. "You see size, great speed, the fact he played bas-

ketball in the SEC. You wonder, Is this guy another Terrell Owens?"

"I think he's a safety," says Rams coach Mike Martz says. "The range, the speed, the competitiveness. . . . I think he'd be a very good defensive player."

"He's a Slash guy, a quarterback/receiver like Kordell Stewart was," says Carolina Panthers coach John Fox. "If someone had big brass ones, they'd suit him up as the second quarterback, give him his own package as a receiver and make him a core special teams player. Let's say you used him as the personal protector on the punt team, the up man. The defense would have no idea how to defend him. I think he'd make so many plays, but not at a single position."

"I thought at the Senior Bowl he looked like an H-back, or maybe a red-zone wide receiver because of his height," says Texans general manager Charley Casserly.

"I could see him as a situational running back, a quarterback and a receiver," says Pittsburgh Steelers offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt. "With Matt you'll only be limited by how creative you can be."

You can say that again. The Jacksonville Jaguars worked him out as a punt returner. The Cincinnati Bengals and the Detroit Lions put him through tight end drills. Last Friday a delegation from the Philadelphia Eagles watched him work at quarterback and catch passes as a tight end, lined up in the slot and split wide.

The NFL loves the athleticism of a player who on 88 occasions as a collegian ran for 10 or more yards. The NFL loves the athleticism of a small forward who guarded Kentucky star Tayshaun Prince in an SEC hoops game, who in a game against Florida dunked over current Miami Heat starting forward Udonis Haslem and who had a seven-point, seven-rebound, seven-assist, zero-turnover game against Tennessee. But most of all, the NFL loves speed.

If there's one serious concern among the men deciding Jones's fate—other than the change of position—it's how he'll react to the adversity he's likely to face as he adjusts to the NFL. "My big question," says Bengals coach Marvin Lewis, "is how committed he'll be if he doesn't have success early."

Jones sighed when he heard that. "People want to look for reasons *not* to draft me," he says. "I know wherever I play, there's going to be an adjustment period. Look at the young basketball players making the transition from high school. Jermaine O'Neal and Kevin Garnett struggled early, but they had a dream to be the best. I have that dream too. I really believe the only way I won't succeed in the NFL is if I get hurt."

Jones is a country boy, amazed by all the attention he's getting. The son of a football

> **"HE'S SO RARE,"** the Texans' Chris Palmer says. "Someday, I think there's a very good chance these same scouts will be asking, 'Who's the next Matt Jones?'"

DR. Z'S MOCK FIRST ROUND

You hear it everywhere: "Hardest draft I've ever tried to figure out," says Texans general manager Charley Casserly. Part of the problem is that there aren't any franchise players. *(*projected trade)*

1 49ERS ALEX SMITH *QB, Utah*
Cal's Aaron Rodgers has the stronger arm, but new coach Mike Nolan loves Smith's feel for the game and his leadership.

2 BUCCANEERS* RONNIE BROWN *RB, Auburn*
Coach Jon Gruden says the speedy, 233-pound Brown "has the best hands in the draft" and sees him catching 80 balls.

3 BROWNS BRAYLON EDWARDS *WR, Michigan*
Edwards runs a 4.45 and at the combine did 22 reps in the bench press—equal to or better than half the offensive tackles.

4 BEARS CARNELL WILLIAMS *RB, Auburn*
They like Cadillac's burst and explosiveness, though they could switch to Cedric Benson, the last of the Big Three backs.

5 DOLPHINS* AARON RODGERS *QB, California*
What's the bigger need, RB or QB? Some in Miami say Rodgers is too good to pass up. Others favor Brown.

6 TITANS ADAM (PAC-MAN) JONES *CB, West Virginia*
Antrel Rolle was the favored corner for a while, but now the edge goes to the 5′ 9½″ Jones and his 4.41 speed.

7 VIKINGS MIKE WILLIAMS *WR, USC*
He won't dominate downfield like Randy Moss, but he's bigger (6′ 5″, 230). The year off hasn't diminished his value.

8 CARDINALS CEDRIC BENSON *RB, Texas*
Dennis Green says he'll take "whichever of the Big Three is left," but he'll take Rolle if he can acquire the Bills' Travis Henry.

9 REDSKINS ANTREL ROLLE *CB, Miami*
After losing a starting cornerback each of the last two years, Joe Gibbs is looking to add a DB.

10 LIONS DERRICK JOHNSON *OLB, Texas*
Still trying to get faster on defense, Detroit picks up an open-side linebacker who flies to the ball with 4.50 speed.

11 COWBOYS DEMARCUS WARE *DE-OLB, Troy*
Perfect guy for a unit that was next to last in the NFC in sacks in '04 and hasn't had a double-digit sacker in nine years.

12 CHARGERS SHAWNE MERRIMAN *DE-OLB, Maryland*
With its two first-rounders, San Diego wants a defensive lineman and a wideout. DE Marcus Spears is the second option.

13 TEXANS ALEX BARRON *T, Florida State*
Wow, not a single offensive lineman among the first 12 picks. The 6′ 7½″ Barron has the longest arms in the draft.

14 PANTHERS TROY WILLIAMSON *WR, South Carolina*
With Muhsin Muhammad gone, in comes Williamson, a player with 4.32 speed who averaged 19.3 yards a catch.

15 CHIEFS THOMAS DAVIS *S, Georgia Tech*
"I know, 15th is awful high for a safety," Dick Vermeil says, "but this guy can do so many amazing things, I can't pass him up."

16 SAINTS CARLOS ROGERS *CB, Auburn*
They're happy with their front seven. The secondary's the problem, and Rogers offers a quick cure.

17 BENGALS ERASMUS JAMES *DE, Wisconsin*
They'll be saying, "Never in our wildest dreams did we think the Number 1 defensive player on our board would still be there."

18 VIKINGS DAVID POLLACK *DE-LB, Georgia*
Mike Tice will find a place for this fiery competitor, whom scouts project as an inside 'backer.

coach from Fort Smith, Ark., he's perfectly willing to switch positions, which many star college quarterbacks are loath to do. "I think it's a blessing to play in the NFL," he says. "Receiver, running back, quarterback, whatever, I don't care. If they want me to play more than one spot, or offense and defense, maybe nickelback, whatever, I'm fine with it. Eric Crouch wanted to play quarterback, and he ended up not playing at all. [Pittsburgh wideouts] Hines Ward and Antwaan Randle El just wanted to play, and look at the careers they've had. I just want to play."

Ward was a part-time signal-caller at Georgia, Randle El a full-time option quarterback at Indiana. At Arkansas, Jones operated out of pro-style and option sets. As a runner he often looked like a man among boys. Last season he took a snap at the Alabama six and made a play-action fake to his running back. By the time he turned around five yards behind the line, defensive end Mark Anderson was on top of him and linebacker Juwan Garth was closing fast. Jones pirouetted to his right and retreated to put some distance between him and his pursuers. Anderson dived and missed Jones at the 16, but as he headed for the goal line, Garth appeared to have the angle on him as he tightroped the sideline. Jones was too fast, though, and Garth missed on his diving tackle attempt. As Jones burst into the end zone, two more Alabama defenders bounced off each other like a pair of Keystone Kops.

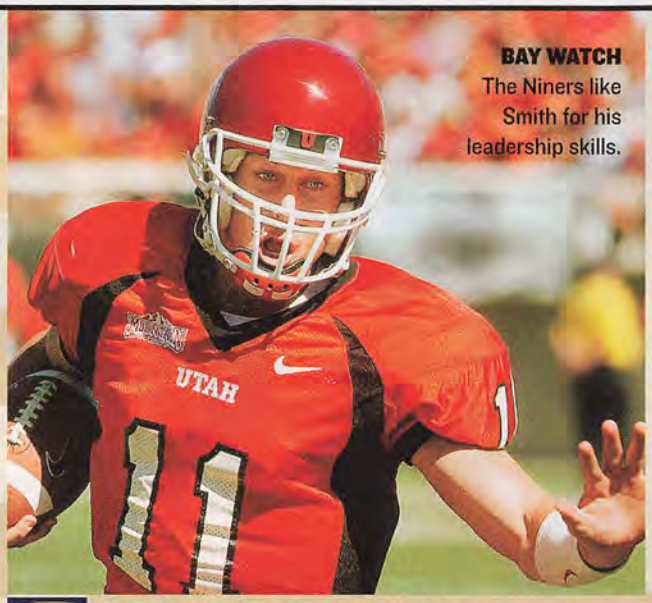
Of course, teams will want more from Jones than that 4.4 speed. They'll want the kind of hands that Ward has shown in the NFL. They'll want consistency. They'll want toughness. Right now, they have no idea if Jones has those tools. But they're also scared to death that if they pass on him, he'll be a star for someone else. "In the end," says Palmer, "you have to ask yourself if you've got the courage to be wrong on a high pick. But he's so rare. Someday, I think there's a very good chance these same scouts will be asking, 'Who's the next Matt Jones?' "

The last mystery player to create such a stir was Mike Mamula, a 250-pound pass rusher from Boston College who in 1995 had a boffo combine workout. The Eagles traded a first-round pick and two second-rounders so they could take Mamula seventh in the draft. Mamula never developed into the every-down pass-rushing terror the Eagles had envisioned.

A decade later Philadelphia could be the perfect fit for another athletic freak. By virtue of smart trades in which they moved guard Jon Welbourn and quarterback A.J. Feeley in 2004, the Eagles have five picks in the first three rounds. With no glaring needs on a team that reached the Super Bowl last season and the NFC title game in the previous three years, the Eagles could ease Jones into their system.

"I understand why people wonder about me," Jones says. "I would too. I caught four passes in four years. But I say, Just watch me play football. I don't like to talk about myself, but I put up some numbers. It's not just at the combine that I did good. I'm not saying I'm the best wide receiver in the draft. But I honestly think that as a rookie, in the right system, I'll have 50 or 60 catches with 10 or 12 touchdowns."

Now, who's got the nerve to see if he's right? □



BAY WATCH The Niners like Smith for his leadership skills.

KEN LEVINE/WIREIMAGE.COM

19 **RAMS JAMMAL BROWN** *T, Oklahoma*
They might be willing to trade up for the man they consider the top O-lineman in the draft, and they just might have to.

20 **COWBOYS MARCUS SPEARS** *DE, LSU*
With an outside rusher now on board, they grab a 307-pound power end. His motor might need a little cranking, though.

21 **JAGUARS HEATH MILLER** *TE, Virginia*
They got pass rushers in free agency. Now they get a target for Byron Leftwich. One negative: recent sports hernia surgery.

22 **RAVENS MARK CLAYTON** *WR, Oklahoma*
Heartbroken Ozzie Newsome wanted Jammal Brown. Cheer up, Ozzie. Everyone thought Clayton would be gone too.

23 **SEAHAWKS DAN CODY** *DE, Oklahoma*
There are concerns he may be *too* intense, but the upside is huge and he's a great competitor.

24 **PACKERS SHAUN CODY** *DE-DT, USC*
The defense needs major help, and the 293-pound Cody, who can play end or tackle, is a good place to start.

25 **BRONCOS FABIAN WASHINGTON** *CB, Nebraska*
They lost a corner, so they're only too glad to get this blazing cover guy, one of three sub-4.30 men at the combine.

26 **JETS LUIS CASTILLO** *NT, Northwestern*
He tested positive for andro at the combine, but the scouts say he's a good guy who made a mistake.

27 **FALCONS RODDY WHITE** *WR, Alabama-Birmingham*
A muscular late bloomer who has shot up the board. "Seems like we always take wideouts early," Jim Mora says.

28 **CHARGERS KHALIF BARNES** *T, Washington*
The plan was to take a wideout, but one of the three best O-linemen is still there? Better grab this athletic 305-pounder.

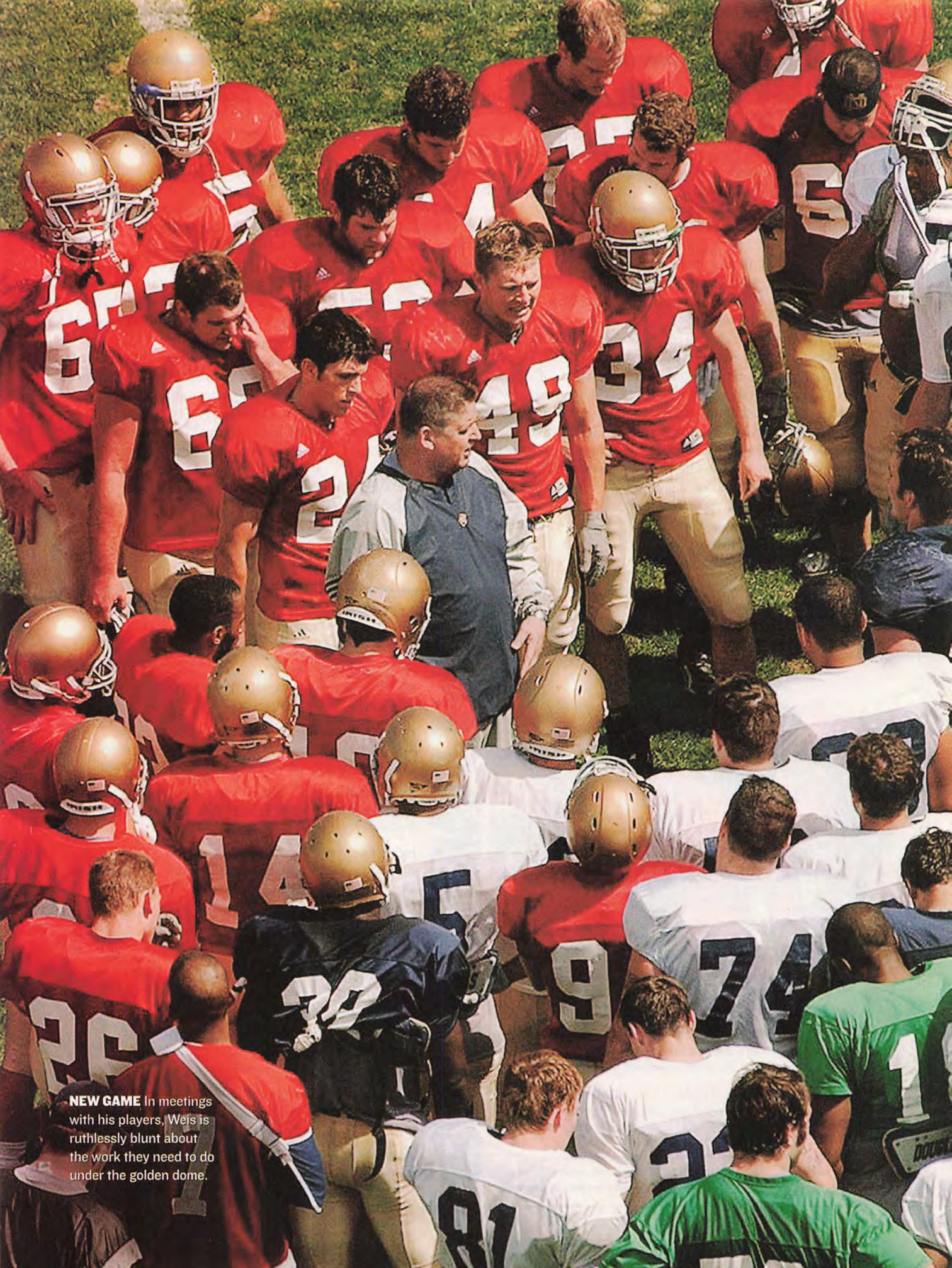
29 **COLTS TRAVIS JOHNSON** *DT, Florida State*
The defense was aggressive last year but got shoved around. This 296-pound run-stopper will give Indy some ballast.

30 **STEELERS MARCUS JOHNSON** *T, Mississippi*
Right tackle Oliver Ross was lost in free agency, so why not pick up an agile 310-pounder who can block on the go?

31 **EAGLES MATT ROTH** *DE, Iowa*
With the departure of Derrick Burgess, Roth, an explosive 278-pounder, seems like a natural here.

32 **PATRIOTS BRODNEY POOL** *FS, Oklahoma*
The secondary was a shambles for most of last season. Pool is brainy and versatile.

—Paul Zimmerman



NEW GAME In meetings with his players, Weis is ruthlessly blunt about the work they need to do under the golden dome.

Charlie In Charge

A graduate of the Parcells-Belichick school of no-nonsense football, Notre Dame alum **Charlie Weis** is the latest coach called upon to put the fight back in the Fighting Irish

BY TIM LAYDEN

Photographs by Joe Raymond

THE NEW Notre Dame coach met the old Notre Dame players on the second weekend in December. Here was Charlie Weis, a big man with bigger plans and three Super Bowl rings—fast going on four—to back him up. He once had been a Notre Dame student, before learning to coach football the hard way, on high school fields and in darkened video rooms, absorbing both abuse and wisdom from taskmasters like Bill Parcells and Bill Belichick. This was his room and his moment.

Before him in the locker room at Notre Dame Stadium were the Fighting Irish players, damaged goods in need of repair. They were the latest incarnation of a faded program that had produced just 56 victories in the past eight years and hadn't won a bowl game since after the 1993 season. Some of them were staring down their third head coach (four if you count the five-day tenure of George O'Leary).

They carried their affection for Weis's predecessor, Tyrone Willingham, on one shoulder—"He was almost like a father figure to me, says senior linebacker Brandon Hoyte—and an inflated opinion of their accomplishments on the other. The Irish went 6–6 last fall, including upsets of Michigan and Tennessee and losses to Brigham Young, Boston College and Pittsburgh by a total of seven points. "A lot of guys in the room felt like we were a lot better than 6–6," says junior quarterback Brady Quinn. "It could have been a whole different season." Still stinging from those nar-

OF TWO MINDS As Weis celebrated a third Super Bowl win with Belichick and Crennel, he was already building his own staff.

row defeats, on this day they needed a collective hug. They didn't get one.

"Fellas," Weis said to his new players, "you are a 6–6 team. You can say whatever you want. 'We could have won this one, we could have won that one.' Well, 'could have' doesn't mean anything. You are what you are. You don't want your head coach to get fired, win more games."

In his crewcut and his suit Weis kept talking. Somewhere in the middle of his speech he stopped dissing and started selling. He talked about running the Patriots' offense and winning Super Bowls. About getting "nasty" on the field. At one point he told his new charges, "Every game, you will have a decided schematic advantage."

In the back of the room sat Mike Goolsby, a departing player who'd attended the meeting curious to hear the latest new guy. Goolsby thought, The guy is confident. That's something we haven't had around here in a long time. We've won some games here and there. Had some nice performances. But we haven't had confidence.

THE PARTING was ugly, no question about that. On Nov. 27 USC made short work of the Irish, 41–10, and three days later Willingham was fired. Notre Dame athletic director Kevin White was the front man for the dismissal, which had been decided upon by a committee formed by the Reverend John Jenkins, who will take over from the Reverend Edward Malloy as university president on July 1. A week after the firing Malloy appeared on a panel on collegiate sports in New York City and said Willingham's firing had made him "embarrassed" to be Notre Dame's president.

The Story Lines of Spring

With April football winding down, these are some of the biggest issues for the 2005 season

1 Has Oklahoma found a successor to Jason White? Not yet. In last Saturday's spring game, junior Paul Thompson (who redshirted last season), sophomore Tommy Grady (White's 2004 backup) and redshirt freshman Rhett Bomar (a former top recruit) all looked shaky in their stints at quarterback. Thompson was the only one of the three who tossed a touchdown pass or completed more than 50% of his attempts, but he also had two interceptions. Grady and Bomar were a combined 14 of 34 with two interceptions. Now coaches say the Sooners might not name a starter until late summer.

2 How will Florida State improve its offense? Now that coach Bobby Bowden has made it clear that his son Jeff will remain offensive coordinator, the only thing frustrated Seminoles fans can hope for are tweaks to an attack that last season averaged a 23-year-low 25.2 points. During spring scrimmages Jeff Bowden—acknowledging the uncertainty at quarterback, where junior Wyatt Sexton has a tenuous hold—often had two speedy tailbacks, senior Leon Washington and junior Lorenzo Booker, on the field simultaneously and put his fullbacks and tight ends in motion.

GRADY (IN BLUE)

3 Can Georgia replace the leadership of David Greene and David Pollack? The answer became murkier after two of the seniors expected to help fill the void, defensive tackle Kedric Golston and linebacker Derrick White, were arrested on April 10 on misdemeanor charges related to a bar fight. Other leaders could emerge from an experienced secondary spearheaded by hard-hitting senior safety Greg Blue and a veteran offensive line anchored by senior guard Max Jean-Gilles.

4 Is it Kyle Wright's time at Miami? Many expected the strong-armed and mobile Wright to take the quarterback job from Brock Berlin last season, but a late-October ankle injury followed by an allergic reaction to a bee sting slowed his development. By outplaying athletic redshirt freshman Kirby Freeman this spring, Wright, a sophomore, finally showed why he was the Hurricanes' top recruit in '03. "Miami's not used to having a quarterback who's so athletic *and* can throw," says coach Larry Coker. "It's going to allow us to do some interesting things offensively."

5 Can Vince Young beat teams with his arm? We know that Young, Texas's junior quarterback, can run opposing defenses dizzy. It's his inconsistent passing that has kept him from greatness. To improve his 1-to-1 career

DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP (TOP); DARREN CARROLL

Amid that climate Notre Dame sought a new coach. After first choice Urban Meyer of Utah took the Florida job, Jenkins and White traveled to Providence to interview Weis. They found a man deeply connected to the passions surrounding Notre Dame football. He's an alumnus (class of '78) who spent four years living on the second floor of the 11-story Flanner Hall, watching Notre Dame win a national championship in football and reach its only Final Four in basketball. "I never missed a game," Weis says. "Doesn't get any better than that."

Weis grew up as a sports nut in central New Jersey, playing center at Middlesex High and living and dying with the Giants, Knicks, Rangers and Yankees. After graduating from South Bend, he coached high school in his home state, then worked as an assistant at South Carolina. One afternoon in early February 1989 Weis had lunch with Gamecocks head coach Joe Morrison, who promised him more responsibility and a new contract. A few hours later Morrison dropped dead of a heart attack.

> "Was I concerned with my appearance?" says Weis of his weight-loss surgery. "Yes, but I was also concerned with **DROPPING DEAD."**

The South Carolina assistants scattered; one of them, Al Groh, landed with the Parcells-coached Giants. Through him Weis got a part-time job analyzing tape for the team. "In the beginning," he says, "it took me 10½ hours to do a game." Now he can break down a game in 90 minutes. The following February, Parcells hired him as defensive quality control and assistant special teams coach—low man on a gifted staff that included not only Parcells but also defensive coordinator Belichick, linebackers coach Groh, offensive coordinator Ron Erhardt and defensive line coach Romeo Crennel, past or future NFL head coaches all. Weis lived alone in a tiny apartment and slept at least two nights a week in his office at Giants Stadium, where his typical workday lasted from five in the morning until well past midnight. "I enjoyed it because I was a fanatical Giants fan," says Weis. "But if you're talking about a life of utopia, this wasn't it."

Especially in the meeting room, where Parcells would regularly humble Weis with withering sarcasm. "Charlie was the whipping boy," says Parcells. "I was the whipping boy once, Belichick was the whipping boy once. Everybody gets to be the whipping boy."

touchdown-to-interception ratio, Young focused this spring on sharpening his short throws and eliminating foolish deep balls. Aided by a matured receiving corps, he showed increased control in the Longhorns' spring game, connecting on 8 of 14 passes for 115 yards, including a 33-yarder to sophomore Limas Sweed.

6 What happens in Auburn's backfield? With quarterback Jason Campbell and tailbacks Ronnie Brown and Carnell Williams NFL-bound, the team's former strength is now its Achilles' heel. In the March 19 A-Day game, sophomore QB Brandon Cox proved accurate but sack-prone, while the tailback trio of juniors Tre Smith and Kenny Irons and sophomore Carl Stewart combined for a ho-hum 148 yards. Says coach Tommy Tuberville, whose team went 13–0 last year, "We're still light years away from having the offense we'll need to compete for a championship."

7 Will Boise State be this season's Utah? No question the Broncos have the talent, with junior quarterback Jared Zabransky foremost among 17 returning starters from an 11–1 team. A difficult schedule could work for or against the Broncos. They face road trips to Georgia, Oregon State and Fresno State and a home date against dangerous Bowling Green. Wins in those games would boost Boise State's profile among poll voters, but losses would remove this Western Athletic Conference member from the BCS picture completely.

8 Who will be Nebraska's quarterback? Don't count on returning starter Joe Dailey, who sank to No. 4 on the spring depth chart at quarterback after having difficulty grasping Bill Callahan's West Coast offense last season. Dailey's heir apparent is Zac Taylor, who dominated last Saturday's Red-White Game by completing 20 of 27 passes for 357 yards and three touchdowns—all in the first half. A transfer from Butler County (Kans.) C.C., which he led to the juco national championship game last year, Taylor "has all the throws in his arm," says Callahan.

YOUNG

IRONS

9 Did someone break a mirror in Iowa City? Iowa can't seem to dodge bad luck. After overcoming a freakish spate of tailback injuries last year (their top five runners all went down) to go 10–2, the Hawkeyes have been dogged by more injuries and illness all spring. Although most of the sidelined players should be back by August, the absences have hindered Iowa's progress. "We're not an elite team, I assure you," says coach Kirk Ferentz. "We have way too many holes."

10 Which backup might emerge as a star? There is an upside for Cal to the graduation of All-Pac-10 running back J.J. Arrington, and his name is Marshawn Lynch. Coming off a quietly stellar 2004 in which he averaged 8.8 yards on 71 carries, Lynch, a sophomore who according to Rivals.com was the second-best tailback recruit in the country last year, behind Oklahoma's Adrian Peterson, will be relied on for big plays while a new quarterback and young receivers gain experience. For opponents, the only thing scarier than Lynch's 4.4 speed is that four offensive line starters return to block for him. —*Kelley King*

DARREN CARROLL (TOP); JOHN REED/US PRESSWIRE

Meanwhile, in Seattle ...

Tyrone Willingham takes over at Washington, where the beleaguered Huskies desperately need a steadying hand

THREE YEARS into a five-year deal with Notre Dame, after 21 wins and 15 losses, Tyrone Willingham got the boot. Washington athletic director Todd Turner was on the phone with him that day. Less than two weeks later Willingham was introduced as the Huskies' new coach. He had been out of work for all of 12 days.

Seated at his new desk overlooking Lake Washington last week, Willingham was invited to lash out at his former employer. Instead he had this to say: "I may not have fumbled [at Notre Dame]; I might have fumbled. But the event occurred, and life is about dealing with it and moving on."

TY-TANIC TASK Willingham must turn around a team that was 1–10 in '04.

Willingham has moved on. He began his first team meeting at Washington with a PowerPoint presentation. The first slide said, THE RETURN OF THE DAWGS. "And fellas," said Willingham, fixing his gimlet eyes on the Huskies, "I'm not talking about a poodle."

Ever since the scandal-scarred reign of Rick Neuheisel ended in July 2003, the program known locally as Probation Nation had become unintimidating, effete, poodlelike. When Neuheisel's replacement, the hapless Keith Gilbertson, resigned after last year's worst-in-school-history 1–10 record, Turner convened a council of ex-Huskies. What kind of feedback did he get? "It all focused on returning us to a program of disciplined toughness," he says. "What Washington football used to be about was getting people up here on a misty afternoon and beating them into the turf. We've lost that. We need to get it back. Tyrone fit the bill perfectly."

Willingham is a superb fit in Seattle, not just because he will put the bite back in the Dawgs. His uprightness, in both carriage and conduct, will help restore the integrity of an athletic program rocked in recent years by various NCAA rules infractions. Says Turner, "Here's a candidate who's been Pac-10 Coach of the Year twice, who's been national coach of the year, who's taken a team to a BCS bowl, who graduates everybody and has never had a hiccup with the NCAA. It was an easy decision."

What about Willingham's hiccups on the sideline at Notre Dame? After storming to an 8–0 start in his first season, he lost 15 of his next 27 games. But Turner has "no doubts whatsoever" about Willingham's ability to win. "This is a guy with a proven football mind," Turner says.

Urgency, focus, accountability—these are the buzzwords under Willingham. Team meetings are now held at 6:30 a.m. When a Husky skips a class, he runs . . . as does everyone else who plays his position. Long hair and facial hair are no longer permitted. "He's very structured, very organized, everything has a purpose—exactly the mentality we were lacking," says starting center Brad Vanneman. "He wants to win right away, and as a senior, that's something I really want to hear."

Turner has vowed to give Willingham all the help he needs. But the AD acknowledges that Willingham must be the driving force if Washington football is to rise again. He recounts a recent conversation in which the coach asked him how long it would take to get that work done on the stadium.

Smiling at his new hire, Turner told him, "You're the guy who'll determine that."

—Austin Murphy

Yet it was a perfect environment in which to learn the game. "From the beginning he could keep a lot of balls in the air," says Belichick. "He was breaking down film for me, for Romeo, for [special teams coach] Mike Sweatman. He's a really smart guy—you could see that from Day One."

The Giants won Parcells's second Super Bowl in January 1991, and barely a month later Weis met his future wife, Maura, at a pub on the Jersey shore. They were married that summer and now have two children: Charlie, 11, and Hannah, 10. (Hannah is globally developmentally delayed, meaning that her motor, social and speech abilities have been slow to progress; in 2003 the Weises started Hannah & Friends, a foundation that has raised nearly $600,000 for underprivileged families with special-needs children.)

Between 1990 and 2004 Weis did the NFL's Northeast corridor tour: three years with the Giants, four years with the Patriots, three with the Jets under Parcells and five back in New England as Belichick's coordinator in three Super Bowl wins. "He has a knack for calling plays, for timing and setting things up," says Belichick of Weis. The Patriots' coach remembers two games in particular: Super Bowl XXXVIII, in which Weis orchestrated the game-winning drive, and January's divisional playoff victory over Indianapolis. "In the Indianapolis game, Charlie was really efficient in terms of keeping our offense on the field and theirs off the field," Belichick says.

Both of those games came after Weis almost died in the summer of 2002. With roughly 340 pounds on his 6' 1" frame, he decided to undergo gastric bypass surgery. It was widely reported that he did it to improve his appearance and thereby boost his chances of a head-coaching job. "My father had a heart attack at 51 and died at 56—that's what scared me," says Weis. "Was I concerned with my appearance? Yeah, but I was also concerned with being a fat slob, dropping dead and leaving my wife with two kids, one with special needs."

His wife felt the surgery was impulsive and unnecessary. "It was typical Charlie," says Maura. "He decided to do it, and two weeks later he had the surgery."

After the surgery Weis was hospitalized for a month with complications from severe internal bleeding. Yet he recovered in time for the Patriots' training camp, where he used a wheelchair and a motorized scooter to get around. He took practice

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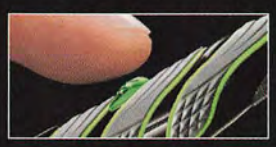

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tapes home at night, and quarterback Tom Brady visited every evening after practice. Three years later Weis is down to about 255 pounds, but he has no feeling in the lower part of his right leg and walks with a noticeable limp. He has filed suit against Massachusetts General Hospital.

"I probably should have died," he says, and then pauses for effect and raises his eyebrows. "But I didn't."

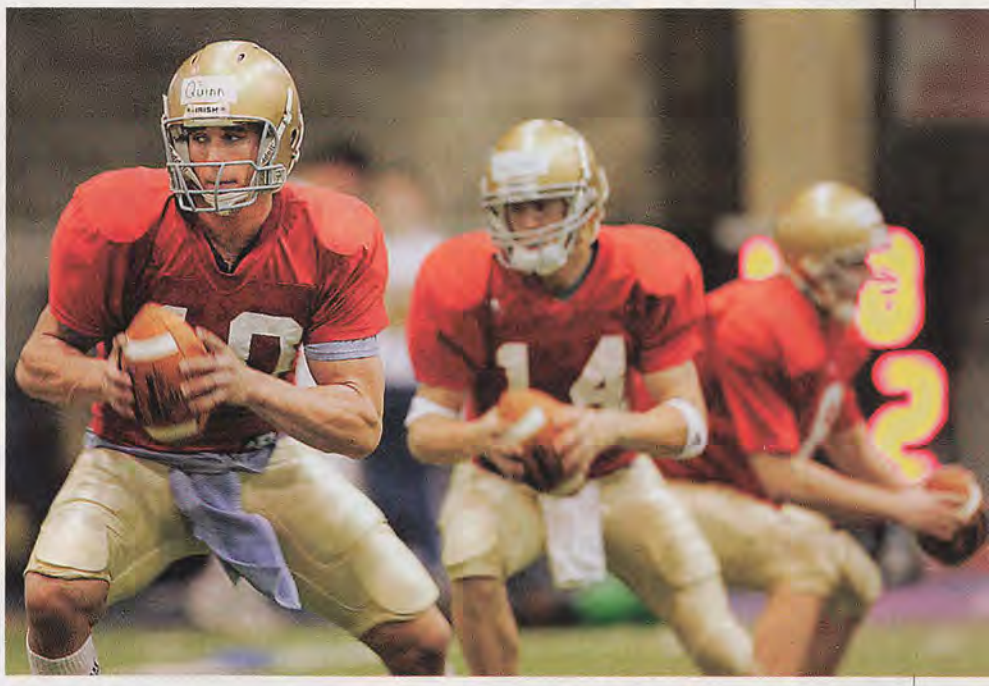
WEIS MAY or may not be the right person to lead Notre Dame back to the elite. But he is arriving at a time when some longstanding obstacles to that goal are falling. Willingham and his predecessor, Bob Davie (and even Lou Holtz in his later days in South Bend), were bedeviled by the three-headed monster of substandard facilities, unrealistically difficult scheduling and often too-exacting admissions standards. Glacially, Notre Dame has addressed these issues.

Late this summer the school will unveil the $22 million Guglielmino Athletics Center, a sprawling network of football offices and meeting rooms, along with a recruiting lounge and a 25,000-square-foot conditioning center, which is already in use. The complex brings Notre Dame squarely alongside schools like Oklahoma and Texas in the arms race to attract recruits and make them play better. "I hope it's not a palace," says Jenkins, sheepishly. Well, it's a palace. And it was long overdue for a football program that aspires to greatness.

The schedule has been another problem. During the dark days of his tenure, Davie would pull a copy of future schedules from his desk drawer and place it on the desk as if it were a death sentence. While maintaining independent status and playing a national schedule, Notre Dame has too often loaded its docket with powers from major conferences. Change is in the works. "It's nice to play a Top 10 team every week," says Jenkins, "but it's too much to ask." If the NCAA, as expected, passes legislation permitting teams to play 12 regular-season games a year, Notre Dame will adopt a schedule that will include seven home games, three of which will be against lower-tier teams from BCS conferences or mid-major conference teams—not patsies, but schools that Notre Dame will consistently be expected to beat.

Admissions is a more nebulous issue. Notre Dame famously took a pass on such future stars as 2002 Heisman Trophy winner Carson Palmer (USC) and T.J. Duckett (Michigan State), but sources familiar with the school's admissions system insist this wasn't because Notre Dame was rejecting *all* athletes with grades or test scores below the Notre Dame norms; it just made poor choices (in football terms) as to which underperformers to admit. The school has a sterling record of graduating whomever it accepts, and Weis says, "I've found admissions more than willing to work with us."

IN SYNC Quinn (far left) and his teammates have high praise for the passion—and the confidence—Weis has brought to the Irish.



"I went into the Jets and New England with Parcells and Belichick," says Weis, "and those situations were **MUCH WORSE** than this one."

For now Weis will have to win largely with Willingham's—and even some of Davie's—players. "We have enough here to be very competitive," Weis says. At spring practice he did no coddling. On the first day, his players needed more than a dozen tries to complete eight satisfactory sprints. In the spirit of the Patriots, there will be no individuals, only a team. "He told us that playing like champions means more than touching the sign [in the stairwell leading from the Notre Dame locker room, which reads PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION TODAY] on the way out to the field," says senior kicker D.J. Fitzpatrick. Weis built a first-rate Notre Dame staff in January while he was game-planning for the Super Bowl, which should put him in the multitasking Hall of Fame.

The players have also learned that the coach can, indeed, X and O. "He tells you what every player on the field is doing," says sophomore tailback Darius Walker. "Then you watch the tape and it's, like, Man, he knows what he's doing." Quinn has been force-fed the Patriots' offense, a multiple package widely praised for its flexibility, while Weis tries to assess how much the quarterback can handle. If Weis is worried, it doesn't show. "I went into the Jets and New England with Parcells and Belichick, and those situations were much worse than this one," he says.

Malloy, meanwhile, serves out his term across campus, beneath the venerable golden dome in the same modest office where over the 18 years of his presidency he has regularly professed his belief that the university will return to football preeminence. "Hopefully Coach Weis and his staff will be successful," he says. "Only time will tell how quickly he can be successful at the level that some parts of our constituency expect." This is Weis's honeymoon, of course, but at Notre Dame, honeymoons are not what they used to be. □

AL TIELEMANS

Get On The Stick

A longtime niche sport, **lacrosse** is the fastest-growing game in the U.S. at every level. The appeal? It's a neat composite of other sports, it's fast, it's easy to learn. And it's cool

BY ALEXANDER WOLFF

SPECIAL REPORTING BY JULIA MORRILL

Photograph by Larry French

"I'm not that big, but I can still be good. You don't have to be way tall, like in basketball, or really big, like in football."

—ANDREW SHUMWAY, 17, UTAH

"I love the passing, the getting assists. I think the girls' game is better because there's more teamwork."

—LIZZIE STRAZZA, 10, COLORADO

"The gear is really cool. It's pretty futuristic and looks like robot stuff."

—JUSTIN HARDIN, 17, TEXAS

WHAT THESE kids are describing isn't North America's first lacrosse boom. That occurred centuries ago, when no other sport existed but the one Native Americans played, sometimes for days at a time, with hundreds of players on fields free of boundary lines. But what's happening today—the surge of interest in lacrosse among boys and girls, the spread of the game westward, the seeping of lacrosse into the culture at large—does share one thing with its ancient forebear: Lacrosse again looks like a game with no boundaries. ¶ Twenty years ago lacrosse—in shorthand, lax—existed as a niche sport, popular in and around Baltimore and parts of New York State and New England, with most of the top players developed on boarding school campuses. Now the number of youth-league players in the U.S. aged 15 and under is estimated to be 186,000, more than twice what it was in 2001. The explosion is similar at the high school level, where no

other team sport has anything close to lacrosse's rate of growth *(page 65)*. Two African-American midfielders, Johns Hopkins's Kyle Harrison and Ohio State's Regina Oliver, are among this season's best college players, a striking development in a sport long associated with pedigreed preppies. Equipment sales are rising by at least 10% annually, and a 2004 survey of 400 sports-industry executives identified lacrosse as the pro niche sport most likely to bust out. "There's a drumbeat," says Bob Crowley of Mustang Management, a private equity firm that has sunk millions into the lacrosse equipment company Cascade. "Just go into your community on a Thursday night and look at the number of kids playing lacrosse."

The game is even penetrating the consciousness of Joe Fan. While in 2002 you could have found precisely three nationally televised lacrosse games, all collegiate, on network and cable, this year NBC has already aired the All-Star Game of the indoor National Lacrosse League and will cover the NLL Champion's Cup final on May 14; the just-launched network ESPNU will add 10 regular-season games to ESPN's NCAA championship coverage; over the summer ESPN2 plans to air a game of the week from Major League Lacrosse, the outdoor pro league, for 12 weeks; and cable newcomer CSTV is airing 22 college games, men's and women's, in all divisions. Nearly 47,000 people turned out in Baltimore last spring for the semifinal matches of the NCAA men's Final Four, and for the final, between Navy and Syracuse, ESPN logged a record 0.7 rating, nearly doubling its figure from 2002.

Notably, lacrosse has broken out of the East and planted its flag all over the country. This season unbeaten Northwestern is ruling the women's game, and the top-ranked Johns Hopkins men just signed a defenseman from Rancho Bernardo, Calif. Since 2000 four state high school athletic associations—in California, Florida, Georgia and Michigan—have sanctioned lacrosse for boys and girls, and the rosters of college powers such as Duke, Navy and Syracuse feature players from Dallas, Denver and San Diego. When Laura Qualey, now 15, took up lacrosse in suburban Salt Lake City four years ago, there were no girls' leagues, and she had to content herself with clinics "taught by a guy who didn't even know that much." Now, she says, "there's a winter league for girls and advanced clinics, and my high school is starting a team."

COMING ON TV ratings and crowds shot up at last year's men's Final Four, won by Syracuse.

Five years ago 43 lacrosse teams existed in Washington State at the youth, junior high and high school levels. The number is now up to 99, and last spring more than 12,000 people turned out at Seattle's Qwest Field for a tripleheader: the state boys' and girls' high school championship games and an MLL exhibition.

In four years enrollment has tripled at the girls' lacrosse camp run by Stanford women's coach Michele Uhlfelder, and the Bay Area supports its own lax retailer, Sling It! But the epicenter of California lacrosse may be to the south. A year ago East Coast power Garden City High of Long Island schlepped to the San Diego suburbs and lost 8–7 to Torrey Pines High. Like the 1936 Stanford-LIU basketball game in which Stanford's Hank Luisetti unveiled the one-handed shot in Madison Square Garden, the Garden City–Torrey Pines game bound the two coasts in mutual respect.

Part of the game's appeal is its composite nature. If you like basketball, lacrosse offers zone and man-to-man defenses, fast breaks and set plays, and its basic offensive maneuver is that hoops staple, pass and screen away from the ball. If you like soccer, lax has the precision passes and the ability to bring spectators to their feet with a goal—except that fans find themselves on their feet 20 times a game. If you like ice hockey, the action and even the terminology are much the same in lacrosse, from face-offs to man advantages to setups behind the net. And if you're a boy who likes football, you get to put on a helmet and pads and hit somebody. (The difference, says former Syracuse coach Roy Simmons Jr., is that lax "is not 11 guys coming out of a huddle knowing what's about to happen. It's more fanciful, imaginative and open.") The

SIMON BRUTY

women's game, by contrast, is noncontact, without helmets or pads, and its prohibition of body checking allows for more fluid play.

It's probably no coincidence that one sport lacrosse fails to echo is baseball, whose popularity among kids is stagnant or dropping. And lacrosse is at least partly responsible for that decline, for it goes head-to-head against baseball in the spring. "I introduced my friends to lacrosse," says James VanLangen, 12, of Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. "Probably like 14 people quit [other sports] after they saw us playing . . . mostly baseball."

"Field hockey is so slow," says Alexi Sanders, 17, of Cherry Creek, Colo. "So much more adrenaline and energy comes out in lacrosse."

"I like it because it's really fast-paced," says Ethan Shaw, 12, who lives in Dallas. "In football you get to hit people, but it's not as fast [as lacrosse], because you stop after every play."

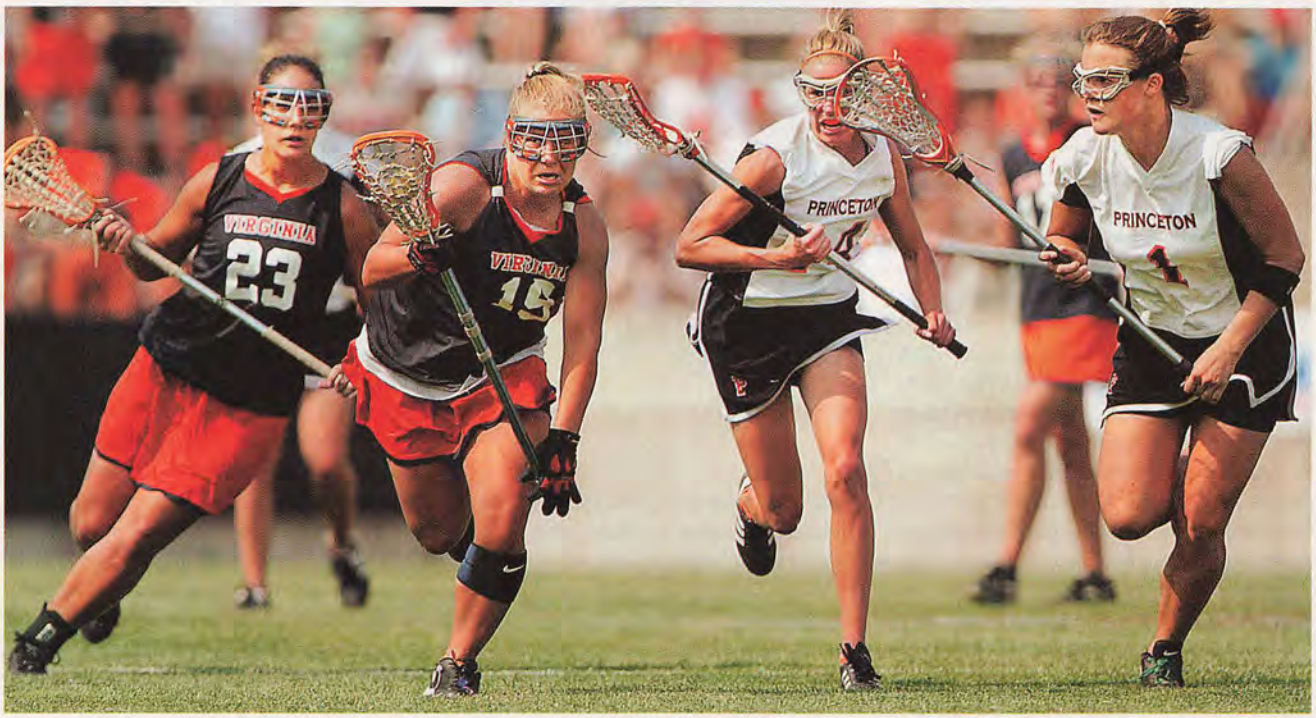
As parents discover that lacrosse is more exciting than soccer, cheaper than ice hockey and not as dangerous as football, the game is getting a closer look. If they're not careful, lacrosse's promoters risk setting up the sport for an almost impossible task: Scroll down the long list of what ails youth sports, and in most cases lacrosse seems to offer an antidote. Youth lax programs don't hesitate to ban zones and long sticks on defense, switch players from position to position or do whatever else it takes to keep kids engaged without changing the essence of the game. At all-day lax "jamborees" the games are almost incidental to the picnicking and socializing. US Lacrosse, the national governing body for the sport, also holds annual Youth Festivals where 15-and-under and 13-and-under games fill a dozen fields but no one officially keeps score.

A kid today will often turn to extreme sports for the autonomy they bestow: No parent or youth coach knows skateboarding well enough to project his unfulfilled dreams or adult insecurities onto a rider and mess with the kid's fun. In lacrosse, too, "parents aren't yelling as much on the sidelines, because they don't know what's going on," says David Morrow, a former U.S. national team player who founded the equipment company Warrior *(page 64)*. "Kids can really take ownership of the sport."

In fact, while youth baseball coaches expect 10-year-olds to hit the cutoff man and turn double plays, lacrosse makes only modest demands on a beginner. "At its simplest, lacrosse is shoveling," Morrow says. "If you can scoop the ball off the ground and run fast, you don't even need to know how to cradle [the wrist action that enables a player to control the ball in his stickhead]. You can get a shot off before you lose the ball." Moreover, at a time when kids feel pressure from coaches and parents to specialize in one sport, lacrosse has long encouraged the renaissance approach. "I've never heard a soccer coach say, 'I want him to play lacrosse too,' " says Dan Corcoran, a youth coach in Connecticut, "but all the time you'll hear lacrosse coaches say something like, 'You can see his toughness from playing hockey.' We get baseball players by encouraging them to play both sports."

Scan a list of Division I lacrosse All-Americas, men or women, and you'll find that virtually all played several sports in high school. Virginia men's coach Dom Starsia never saw his best defensive midfielder, J.J. Morrissey, play lacrosse before offering him a scholarship; he signed Morrissey based on how he hit the hole as a tailback. Starsia has recruited other athletes who never even *played* lacrosse before arriving in Charlottesville. "In the U.S. we play enough hand-eye sports that a kid is going to pick up the stickwork," he says. "Basically, I've got a team full of I-AA football guys."

Lacrosse even has an ace up its sleeve: a pilot program that US Lacrosse just launched with the Stanford-based Positive Coaching Alliance, a group dedicated to eliminating abusive and unsportsmanlike behavior by youth coaches, parents and



CHASING AMY The nation's top women's player, Amy Appelt (19), led Virginia to the 2004 NCAA title.

TIM LARSEN/AP

spectators. Under the program lacrosse officials, including a "sideline manager" supplied by each team, can hand out a colored card—inscribed with the words PLEASE RETHINK YOUR ACTIONS/THIS EVENT MAY BE TERMINATED IF YOUR CONDUCT DOES NOT IMPROVE—to put a spectator on notice that his behavior is unacceptable. If the misconduct does not stop, the game could be called and the loss assigned to the team unable to control its supporters.

"We're small enough to introduce these seeds at the grassroots, while other sports are so vast that it's tough to make changes sportwide," says US Lacrosse executive director Steve Stenersen. "We have an interesting mix of qualities, and at a very interesting time, when people are more and more fed up with sports in general."

In the 1630s, while watching the Huron Indians play their ball game, a French Canadian missionary decided that the stick they used resembled a bishop's crosier. In his journal he called the game *le jeu de la crosse*. About 230 years later a Montreal dentist, W. George Beers, wrote up a set of rules that adapted the Native American game to Victorian specifications. As old as lacrosse is, the U.S. game has had a unified national governing body for only seven years. Over that time US Lacrosse—which makes rules and policies for most levels of the game, helps develop the game at its grassroots and sanctions youth tournaments, the high school national championships and the college club championships—has increased what it spends to promote the sport from $1.1 million to $9 million. Still, US Lacrosse's operating revenue of $6.2 million in 2003 was less than a third of USA Hockey's $22.5 million.

Upon his death last year Norm Webb, a former goalie at West Point, left virtually his entire $4.5 million estate to US Lacrosse. The organization will use those additional funds to promote the game's character and culture—"to put that stake in the ground that says, 'This is what we are,' " says Stenersen. Lacrosse people take what they are very seriously. It's a bromide within the sport that no one merely likes the game; rather, people are divided into those who love it and the benighted masses who haven't yet been introduced to it. The love is perhaps most evident in the nearly 300

The New Breed

Free-spirited Colorado is the center of the revolution in U.S. lacrosse

FOR YEARS lacrosse in Colorado meant one thing: the annual Vail Shootout, at which club players and current and former college players from around the U.S. gathered for a long summer weekend to play the game as well as a good hangover cure would permit. Vail remains as big a bacchanal as ever, but lacrosse is also thriving virtually everywhere else in the Rocky Mountain State: the youth fields of Littleton, Cherry Creek and Colorado Springs; the Division I varsities at the University of Denver and the Air Force Academy; the "virtual varsity" club powers at Colorado State and Colorado; and Denver's 19,000-seat Pepsi Center, where the Colorado Mammoth of the pro indoor National Lacrosse League sold out the house even before the NHL lockout left lacrosse as the lone sticks-and-pads show in town.

Last spring Virginia took its defending NCAA men's champions to Denver and Air Force, only to slink home with two losses. Meanwhile, two of the game's most talented and charismatic figures—former Syracuse attackman Michael Powell, 22, and former Maryland star Jen Adams, 25—call Colorado home, and retiring Mammoth star Gary Gait will move to the state in August. "Our numbers grow by a third a year, and almost all of that is youth," says Abby Burbank, president of the Colorado Lacrosse Foundation. "Now you can start in kindergarten and play competitively in second grade."

Why is lacrosse so visible in Colorado? By straddling the divide between team sport and Gen X pastime, lacrosse jibes with the state's sporting spirit. "Colorado kids aren't year-round players," says Kate Dresher, who stages lacrosse tournaments and clinics for girls. "They do a lot of things—ski, snowboard, hike—and lacrosse allows for that." Girls in the Rockies account for 18% of all female players in the U.S., according to a 2004 study by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. "Soccer is at a saturation point here," says Burbank, "and because lacrosse is such a conglomeration of different sports, it's easy to convert to." On the men's side, says Denver coach Jamie Munro, "more and better athletes are playing, but critical mass is still five or 10 years down the line."

STICK SHIFT The Mammoth (in maroon) are one reason lax has caught fire around Denver.

Last month the University of Denver inaugurated its 5,000-seat, $6.5 million Peter Barton Lacrosse Stadium—the only college venue in the U.S. designed solely for the sport—with a tournament that drew, for a Sunday game between Denver and Towson, a capacity crowd. Meanwhile, Gait, president of the elite National Development Program (NDP), which helps high school players catch recruiters' eyes, will base the organization in Commerce City, near Denver International Airport, where Mammoth and NDP owner Stan Kroenke is building a 360-acre sports complex. Major League Lacrosse, the outdoor summer pro league, should add a Denver franchise when it expands westward with four new teams in 2006. All of which would augur a bright future for the game in Colorado, if the sport there didn't suffer from the same problem that crops up wherever lacrosse is booming: "We have hundreds of thousands of kids who want to play," says Burbank, "but we don't have enough coaches or officials or field space."

BILL FRAKES

men's and women's club teams at colleges, where players pay to play, up to $3,000 a year. Many club squads are so-called virtual varsities, with dazzling uniforms and national schedules. For years the main lacrosse fund-raiser at Cal—a laxathon at which players take turns keeping a ball going on the quad for 100 hours—doubles as a pageant of the players' devotion.

"Final Four weekend really is a pilgrimage," says Middlebury (Vt.) College coach Erin Quinn, whose teams have won three Division III men's titles. "The last time we qualified, about half our team had to cancel reservations because they had planned on going anyway."

Laxheads celebrate any sighting of their game in the larger culture—as Oz's sport in *American Pie*, in the background on *Friends* and on John Kerry's tie on the cover of *Newsweek*. Fans kite off to jamborees in Lake Placid, N.Y.; Las Vegas; Oahu; even Amsterdam. (The Netherlands is one of 30 countries besides the U.S. where lacrosse is played.) Simmons calls the jamborees "parties where a lacrosse game breaks out. You've got your girlfriend and your Lab with a scarf around its neck. You line up and shake hands when it's over and roll out a barrel of beer."

Maybe this dedication follows from lacrosse's many years of confinement to the East Coast. For all that time the sport touched every social stratum, from Baltimore blue blood to public-school Long Islander to Indian on the reservation. Most of the purists share a fraternal bond that evokes a line from an Akwesasne Mohawk history of the game: "When lacrosse was played for the enjoyment of the Great Spirit, everyone was important, no matter how strong or how weak."

The speed and spontaneity of lacrosse may initially draw kids in, but many become more absorbed after they learn of its Native American provenance: that it was considered a gift of the Creator, whom you played to please; that it was used to settle disputes between tribes and to help assure a good harvest; that to give a player the ability to strike suddenly, an elder might scratch him with rattlesnake fangs or smear him with ash from a tree struck by lightning; that even today, when an Iroquois player dies, he is buried with his stick. "That wasn't originally in my consciousness," says Tom Ryan, a former pro who grew up playing on the Akwesasne reservation near his hometown of Canton, N.Y., and runs camps and clinics. "But after college I was looking for something spiritual and found that lacrosse is a way to connect to the Creator."

A young player today may be wearing XXL shorts and eye black instead of a breech cloth and war paint, but people like Ryan, who has dreadlocks down to his coccyx and is known on the camp circuit as the Dude, use the game's roots to connect to young people. "Kids are hungry for story and myth," says John Yeager, who teaches and coaches at the Culver Academies in Indiana. "I had a team where the players wound up calling our fastest kid Deer."

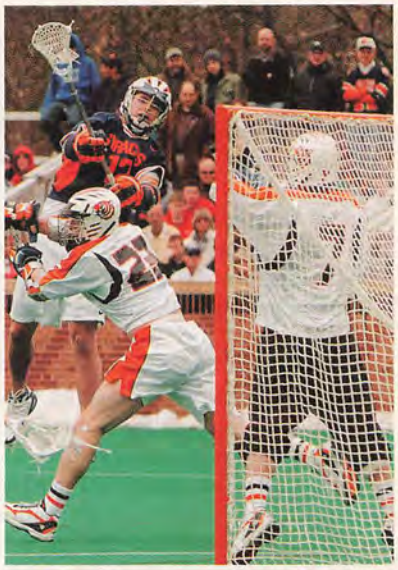
That fuddy-duddy Montreal rules maker may have "divested [lacrosse] of its radical rudeness," as he put it, and a 19th-century account in *Harper's* may have declared the game to be "too exciting, too nervous" for American spectators of the time. But lacrosse today seems bent on scaring up as much excitement, nervousness and radical rudeness as possible as "the alternative team sport."

A lacrosse player is more likely than other U.S. athletes to rock climb, surf or snowboard. Thus lacrosse is gaining a reputation as a lifestyle sport and attracting young obsessives the way surfing and skateboarding do. The sport's preppy origins only make it more tempting for counterculturalists to coopt, in the way that

Lax Days In College

Over the last two decades the number of male and female undergraduates playing lacrosse has risen by at least 75%

SOURCES: LAXPOWER.COM; NCAA


Can the East men dominate much longer?

Scan a list of lacrosse All-Americas, and you'll find that virtually all of them played several sports in high school.

Contact is kept to a minimum in the women's game, but the boys get rough and tumble.

JOSEPH J. QUENAULT (TOP); SIMON BRUTY (2)

the just-off-the-yacht Tommy Hilfiger look became hot in the hood. And next to the lacrosse gear turned out by Warrior, a baseball uniform looks like a pair of pajamas.

Not surprisingly, the gnarliness factor is highest where the game is newest. "Out west the sport has a different image," says Gary Gait, star attackman with the NLL's Colorado Mammoth, whose from-behind-the-net Air Gait slam dunk for Syracuse during the 1988 NCAA tournament remains the most famous shot in lacrosse. "A kid will walk around with a stick the way he might walk around with his skateboard, and he'll be the cool kid at school."

The extreme aesthetic infuses the glossy oversized pages of the monthly *Inside Lacrosse*, whose designers study snowboarding and surfing magazines for inspiration. That look is especially popular in California, where several years ago someone started a three-on-three lacrosse league on the beach. An adolescent who's trying to define himself has a lot of choices in a game that's "*Thunderdome* meets *Braveheart*," as Peter Lasagna, the men's coach at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, puts it. Even the sport's growth among girls owes something to lacrosse's ability to anticipate how young people want to express themselves. "The sticks are a novelty; Harrow makes hot pinks," says Kate Dresher, president of the US Lacrosse Youth Council. "Plus, not everybody is doing it. When I buy clothing, I don't want to look like everybody else." Dresher's company, Colorado-based Gal.lax.y, stages events like Halloween Scream, in which middle school girls go seven-on-seven in costume. If you're a witch, your stick is a broom; if you're a fairy, it's a magic wand. Youth lacrosse isn't just part team sport, part extreme sport; it's part folk art too.

One of the men responsible for putting the *X* in lax is Michael Powell, the third Powell brother to star at Syracuse and the one easily identified by the triangles of eye black he wore for each game. Before his senior season, in 2004, Powell promised to pull off a move that no one had ever seen before, and when he did (it turned out to be a full flip, in the flow of a regular-season game, without dropping the ball), it made *SportsCenter*. Even without that move—and his repertoire of behind-the-back and between-the-legs shots—

Warrior Culture

Using space-age materials and X Games attitude, one company set lax's new style

WHEN DAVID MORROW began a lacrosse-gear business in his Princeton dorm room a dozen years ago, he felt like an insurgent. "My friends and I used to joke that lacrosse was too Thurston Howell III," says Morrow, who arrived on campus in the fall of 1989 from the lacrosse backwater of Troy, Mich. In time he grew a ponytail and bought an orange VW bus, which did not endear him to Princeton's conservative coach, Bill Tierney. But as a junior Morrow anchored the defense that won Princeton its first NCAA lacrosse title, in '92, and within a year he would begin to revolutionize the lacrosse equipment business and the very style of the sport with his company, Warrior Lacrosse.

HOTSHOT Players at Morrow's old Michigan high school, Brother Rice, wear his gear.

Growing up with aluminum sticks, Morrow had been frustrated by how easily they bent and broke. So in the spring of 1992 his father, who had a metal tubing business, began sending him sample titanium sticks, and David shared them with his teammates. No one at that year's NCAA tournament other than the Tigers and their coaches knew that eight Princeton players used shafts made from titanium—which is half the weight of aluminum and five times as strong—as they defeated Maryland in the quarterfinals. The next weekend Morrow equipped seven more teammates with lightweight sticks, which he believes helped the Tigers sweep through the Final Four, beating Syracuse for the title.

That summer Morrow experimented further with titanium tubes at his father's shop, and by the following February, back at school, he had a thriving business, with a friend cutting shafts for one customer at a time for about $100 a pop. Aerospace-grade titanium costs five times as much as aluminum, but serious players proved to be willing to pay for performance. Meanwhile Morrow was NCAA Player of the Year as a senior, leading the Tigers to another Final Four, where they lost to Syracuse in the semis.

Warrior, which is based in suburban Detroit, manufactures everything from stickheads to pads to on- and off-the-field sportswear, as well as the first line of shoes with cushioning and cleat patterns designed expressly for lacrosse. The product names—Kung Fu grips, Mac Daddy gloves—bristle with attitude, and other manufacturers now imitate the graphics in Warrior's edgy ads. "We saw extreme sports catching on and MTV resonating," Morrow says, "and we took elements from skateboarding, snowboarding and surfing." A year ago Morrow sold out to New Balance in a lucrative deal that allowed him to remain as president of Warrior, which employs 70 people nationwide and expects to do more than $20 million in sales this year.

Warrior is also helping to bankroll Major League Lacrosse, for which it is the exclusive equipment supplier. Now in its fifth season, MLL flogs the sport the way Warrior does—as lifestyle. "It's the work hard, play hard thing," Morrow says, "and they"—by *they* he means Thurston Howell IIIs—"don't like that. The sport being small, we had a chance to redefine it. You can't go into baseball and shake it like a cage."

DAVID H. SCHREIBER

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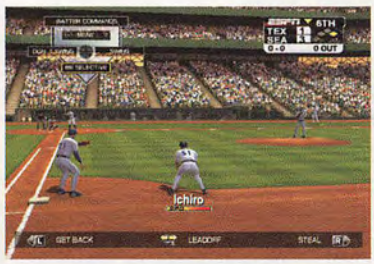

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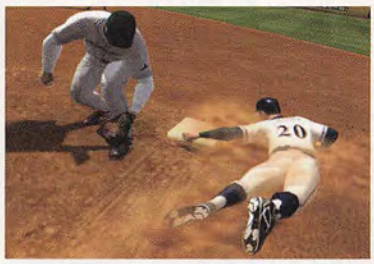

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Powell would be the favorite of any angry young laxman if only because a year ago, after MLL's Baltimore Bayhawks made him their top draft pick, he refused to sign, choosing instead to hang out with his dog, Bodhi, and play his guitar. (He has decided he will play for the Bayhawks this summer and recently signed a deal with Brine that includes his own line of "lifestyle apparel" and calls for him to work with Denver Broncos linebacker Trevor Pryce's Outlook Music to compile a CD of lacrosse-appropriate tunes.)

Nothing allows lacrosse to tap into the hearts of extreme-sport males more than the stick. A player can customize the depth of the pocket and the cant of the head to suit his style of play. A shallow-pocket guy plays fundamental, team-oriented lacrosse. His webbing is taut, and he cradles next to his ear. He can flick quick, accurate passes and shots, the kind favored by conservative, set-play coaches such as Princeton's Bill Tierney. But the rage in the men's game today is the deep pocket. The deeper the pocket, the harder it is for an opponent to dislodge the ball and the easier it is to break a defender's ankles with a one-on-one dodge. The Powell brothers were deep-pocket guys par excellence, and the evolution in equipment helped them push the stylistic envelope.

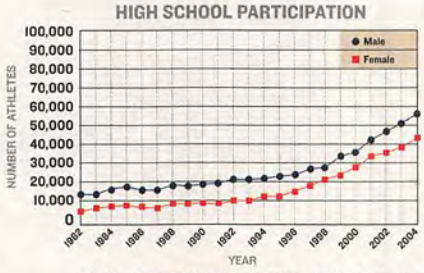
"The biggest challenge in lacrosse was playing with a shallow pocket," says Bob Carpenter, the founder of *Inside Lacrosse* and a former player at Duke. "You had to have great wrists and incredible coordination. Now that challenge is gone. Give a stick to Allen Iverson, and with a week or two of practice he'd be much more effective than a lot of guys back in, say, 1980."

Purists howl at such changes. "People on message boards call the National Lacrosse League a pro wrestling version of lacrosse," Carpenter says, "and some don't want to see the game commercialized. But the walls are coming down. Kids are playing in droves. The game is reaching the gearhead. It's not a couch-potato sport, and it's definitely not a marry-my-high-school-sweetheart, play-football-and-baseball-my-whole-life sport."

When Quinn, the Middlebury coach, surveys the future of his sport, he wrestles with an enigma. "To a person, everyone who plays lacrosse falls in love with it," he says. "Yet now the sport is a pyramid with an enormous base [of youth players] and a little pinprick at the top [college and adults]. The big football schools are adding club teams, but there are still only some 50-odd Division I men's programs. So to me the question isn't, Why is lacrosse booming? The question is, Why hasn't it grown more?"

Prom Date In Cleats?

As more and more state high school associations sanction lacrosse, the sport is growing dramatically—and the girls are keeping pace



SOURCES: LAXPOWER.COM; NATIONAL FEDERATION OF HIGH SCHOOLS

Schoolboys mimic moves of college stars.

The gnarliness factor is highest where the game is newest. "Out west," says Gait, "a kid with a stick is the cool kid."

Coast to coast: Rutgers Prep on the run in New Jersey, upstart Torrey Pines in California.

Answers can be found at the bottom, middle and top of that pyramid. At the bottom is a pool of coaches and officials overwhelmed by the hordes of eager youth players. (In response US Lacrosse offers $25 online courses to train coaches and hopes the colored card program will attract and retain out-of-season soccer, basketball and hockey officials and former lacrosse players who've been out of the game for a while.) In the middle, tight budgets discourage more state high school associations from sanctioning lacrosse. And at the top, football schools eager to stay on the good side of Title IX have stunted the expansion of men's varsity teams.

Meanwhile lacrosse's many stakeholders don't necessarily agree on where the game ought to be going. "All these companies are trying to sell looking cool and having chicks around," says University of Denver men's coach Jamie Munro. "But that whole X appeal is countercultural, and there's a lot more character to the game. The lacrosse sucks in those areas where it's just counterculture."

A turbocharged, forward-hurtling vision of the game was on-

MELANIE GRADINGER (TORREY PINES); JOSEPH J. QUENAULT (2)

stage in the vendors' hall at US Lacrosse's national convention in Philadelphia in January. Competition among the gear companies all but crackled. One manufacturer peddled 18 colors of pocket webbing, including Day-Glo versions. Another firm billed a protective-cup-and-compression-shorts system with the slogan "Performs like Iron Maiden. Feels like Velvet Underground." Gary Gait talked up the National Development Program, the circuit he's launching for elite high schoolers that will culminate in national championships in July and August. And a rep for Lax Scout, a service that lists young players who want to catch the eyes of college recruiters, explained that the service's top categories, Gold and Titanium, were now "by invitation only."

"As the lacrosse market grows, people are trying to leverage it, and many aren't as concerned with the game as with getting their pound of flesh," says Stenersen of US Lacrosse. "The good news is the Johnny Appleseed principle—the volunteers who have served as the conscience and torchbearers of the sport. The tightrope we walk is to make sure we're preserving our ideals. We have to develop as a sport for all."

If you think of lacrosse as that Labrador retriever Roy Simmons Jr. referred to, half the family wants to leave a bandanna around its neck and half wants to crown the dog's head with a do-rag. Manufacturers try to develop gear that will give a customer an advantage; rules makers want to give defensemen a chance by keeping pockets from getting too deep. Promoters know that kids now swap digital files of Michael Powell's coolest moves; purists scoff that "the flip" was all show, and no serious player would ever consider quitting at 22 to play the friggin' guitar. Marketers trick up pro lacrosse with two-point lines and shot clocks and stagecraft like Gait's entrance at a Mammoth game on a Harley; men who prepped at Baltimore's Gilman School and played at Johns Hopkins are appalled that NLL players admit to the existence of goons. Some parents see the sport as a path to a college scholarship; others fear that Gait's National Development Program will bring to youth lacrosse the travel-team lunacy of soccer and basketball.

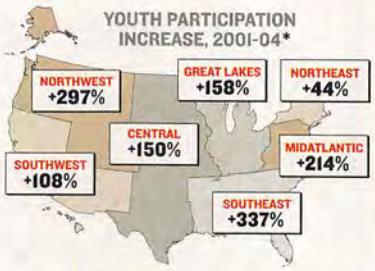
"For a long time we all drank from the same fountain," says Lasagna. "Now people are drinking from different cups. How will the traditions be passed down? Not just the right way to shoot or pass the ball, but the deeper philosophical traditions? I've been at camps and watched 250 kids listen to [Bucknell coach and Native American] Sid Jamieson bring greetings from the People of the Long House and talk about honoring your environment and playing for the Creator. We can't lose that, yet Sid is about to retire. Camps serve a different function now. They're all about recruiting exposure."

In his book *Lacrosse: A History of the Game*, Donald Fisher argues that the sport's overarching theme has always been one of contested ground. But the game has also found comfort in all that knocks around within it. It's a reassuring clatter. As lacrosse enthusiasts fashion a hybrid from these competing strains, they might take inspiration from a Mohawk legend that is often retold, about a game of lacrosse played long ago between the birds and the land animals.

A rodent wanted to join his fellow quadrupeds for the big match, but they rebuffed him because he was small and scrawny. So he scaled a tree and pleaded with the eagles and hawks to be permitted to play with them. The birds agreed and fashioned a pair of wings for him from the skin of a ceremonial drum. Whereupon the rodent joined the winged creatures and, with speed and agility, confounded the deer and the bears and the wolves to help win the game for the birds. Which is how something new—the bat—came to be. □

A Game of Their Own

Young kids flock to lacrosse because it's fast and exciting—and their parents rarely know the first thing about it



* PLAYERS AGED 15 AND UNDER WHO ARE MEMBERS OF US LACROSSE
SOURCE: US LACROSSE

Eight-year-olds in Maryland play for keeps.

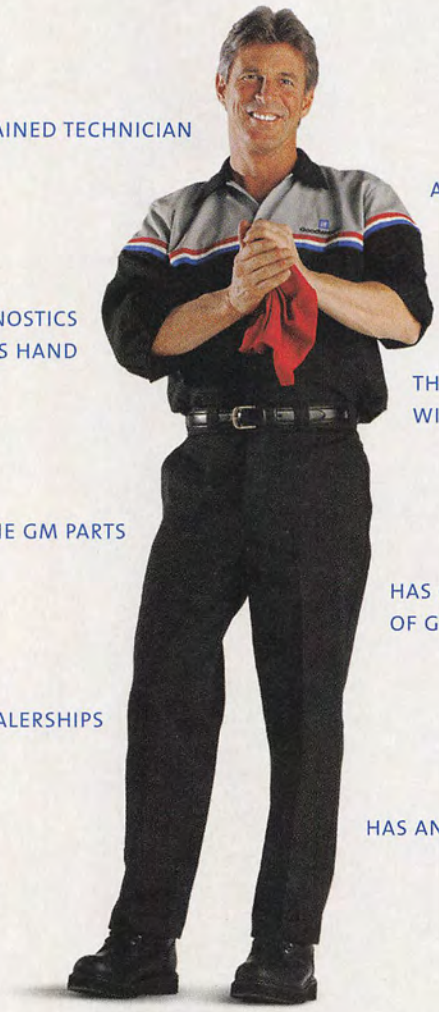
Scroll down the long litany of what ails youth sports, and in most cases lacrosse seems to offer an antidote.

The next generation of players learns stick skills and team play at a Warrior camp.

LARRY FRENCH (3)

Mr. Goodwrench

IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST A NAME



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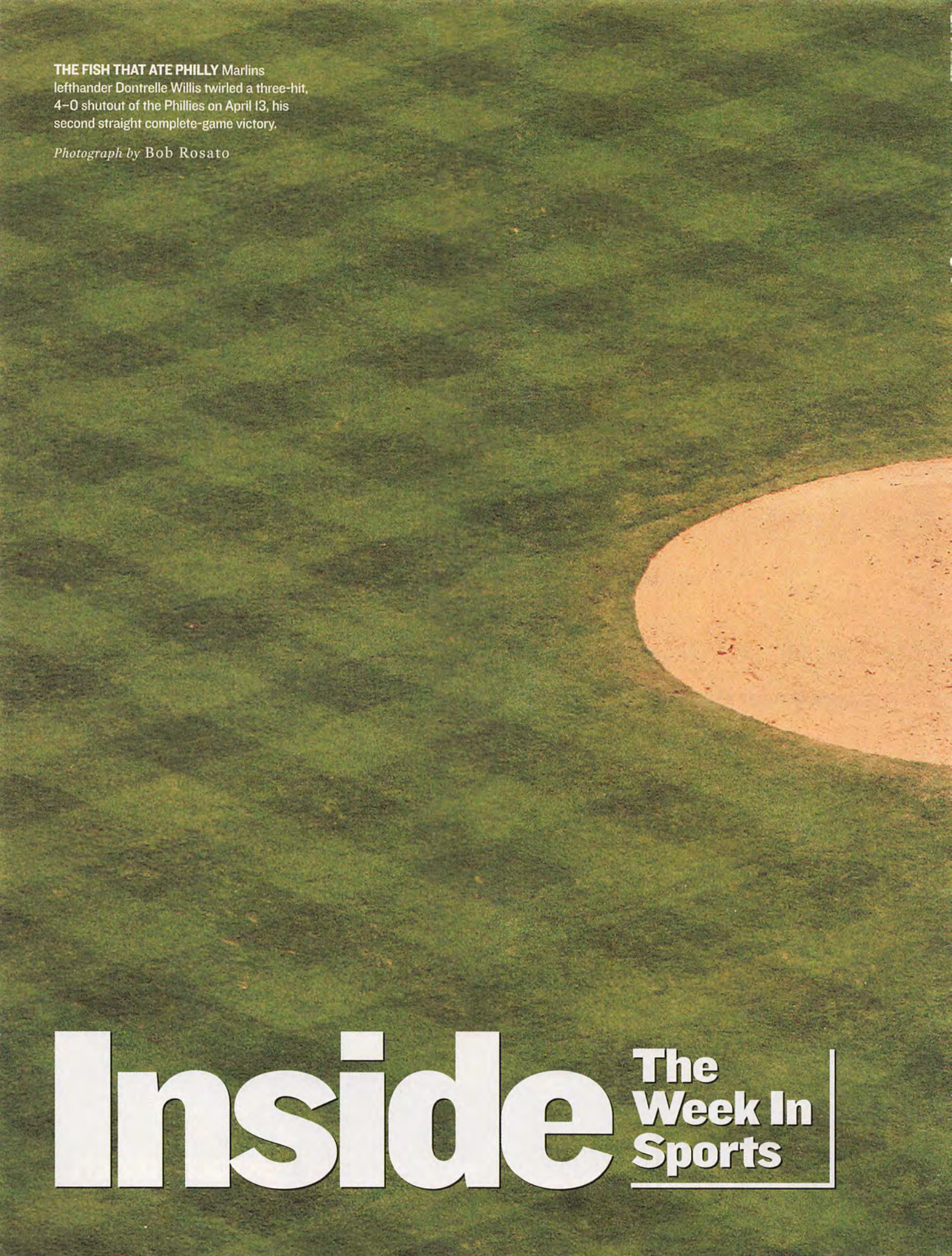
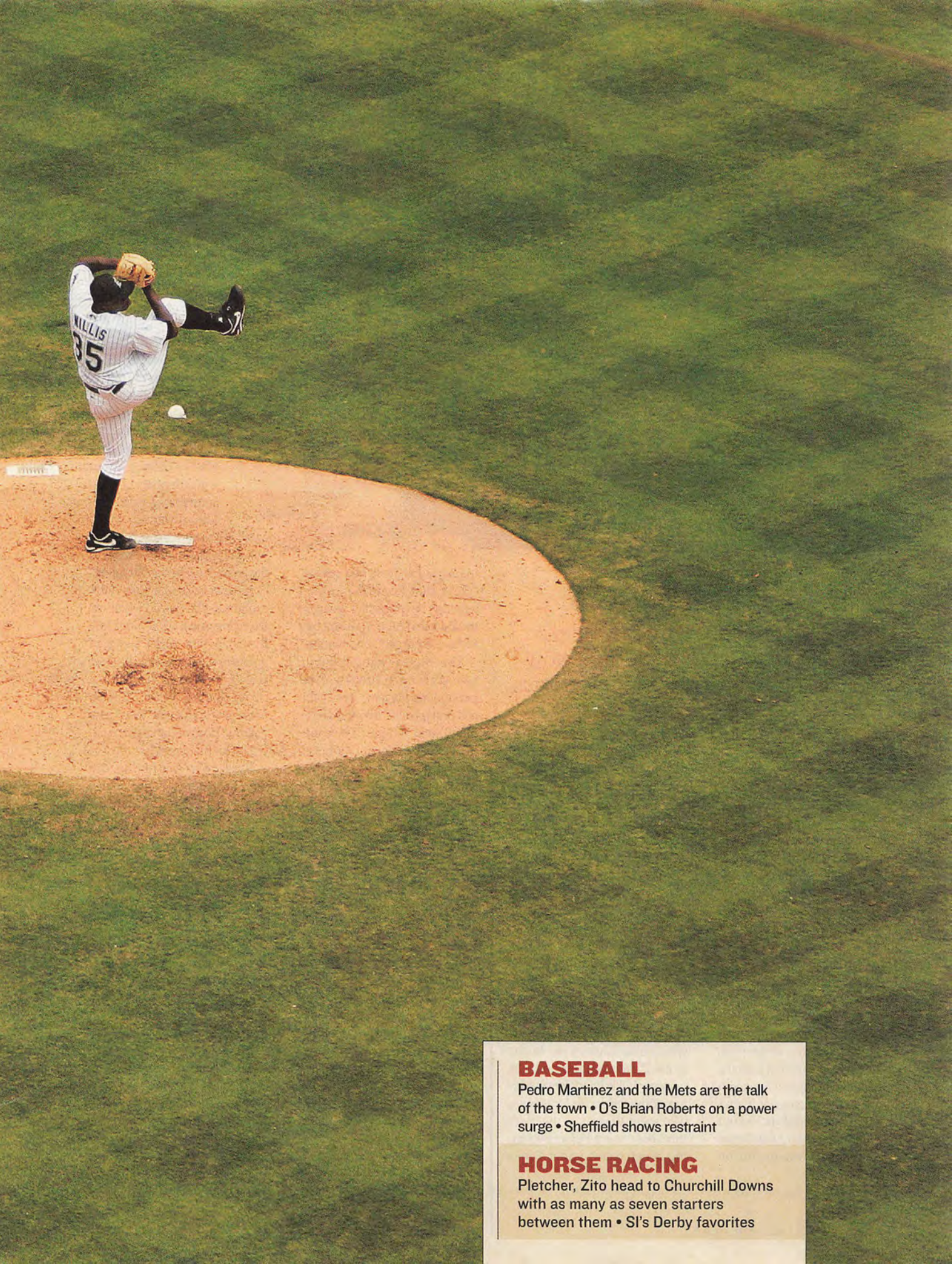


THE FISH THAT ATE PHILLY Marlins lefthander Dontrelle Willis twirled a three-hit, 4–0 shutout of the Phillies on April 13, his second straight complete-game victory.

Photograph by Bob Rosato

Inside

The Week In Sports



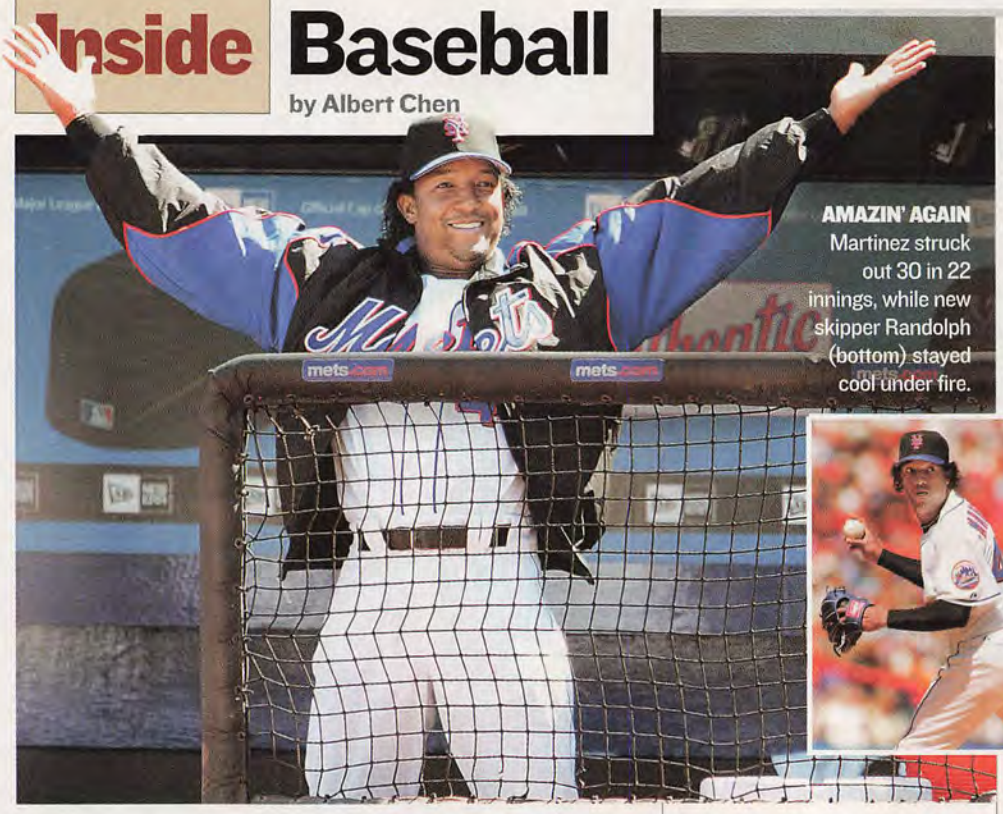
BASEBALL

Pedro Martinez and the Mets are the talk of the town • O's Brian Roberts on a power surge • Sheffield shows restraint

HORSE RACING

Pletcher, Zito head to Churchill Downs with as many as seven starters between them • SI's Derby favorites

by Albert Chen



AMAZIN' AGAIN Martinez struck out 30 in 22 innings, while new skipper Randolph (bottom) stayed cool under fire.

Curtain Call

Led by a dominant Pedro Martinez, the Mets erase an 0–5 start and show up the critics with six straight victories

ALL WINTER new Mets general manager Omar Minaya had envisioned the scene that was unfolding before his eyes last Saturday at Shea Stadium. After spending nearly $200 million in the off-season to remake a crumbling team, Minaya sat in his private box and felt the ballpark shake from the fans' excitement as his new ace, righthander Pedro Martinez, shut down Marlins hitters for seven innings. Minaya saw centerfielder Carlos Beltran, whom he had signed to a seven-year, $119 million contract in January, drill a two-out single in the eighth inning to tie the game at 2. And the G.M. witnessed the sellout crowd of 55,351 erupt as Victor Diaz scored the winning run on a Ramon Castro single in the bottom of the ninth. "It was electric out there," catcher Mike Piazza said after the game, New York's sixth straight victory.

Only a week earlier the Mets were 0–5 and a punching bag for New York tabloids and talk-radio shows. But last weekend, with the team taking two of three from Florida and the Yankees getting swept by the Orioles to fall to 4–8, the city was—for three days, at least—buzzing about the Mets. "I was confident the whole time [during the losing streak]," says cool-headed new manager Willie Randolph, the former Yankees second baseman who spent 10 years as the club's third base coach before becoming bench coach under Yanks manager Joe Torre last season. "Guys that know me know I wouldn't be concerned. Being in the Yankees [culture] meant that I'd be in control of the situation."

The 50-year-old Randolph, who grew up in Brooklyn, impressed his players. "He's calm and unflappable," says third baseman David Wright. "The confidence that this team had even when we were losing all trickled down from him. He was the same when we were 0–5 as he was after we won six in a row. He never panicked."

The New Mets, as Beltran is fond of calling them, also find comfort in having Martinez taking the mound every fifth day. The three-time Cy Young winner, who signed a four-year, $53 million contract as a free agent in December, has been as dominant as ever, striking out 30 in 22 innings en route to a 1–0 record and a 2.45 ERA in three starts. What's more, he has been throwing consistently in the low 90s and hummed a 96-mph fastball past Carlos Delgado during the first of his three strikeouts of the Marlins' first baseman on Saturday. "I don't know what people are talking about when they say he's lost something," says Marlins pitching coach Mark Wiley. "It's pretty clear that he's still without question one of the premier pitchers in the game."

Another key to the Mets' quick turnaround has been 21-year-old shortstop and leadoff hitter Jose Reyes. In New York's sweep of the Astros earlier last week, Reyes scored or drove in the winning run in all three games. "The offense gets going with Jose," says Piazza. "He gives us so much energy with his speed."

Reyes, who was hitting .278 with three stolen bases, missed significant time the last two seasons because of ankle, hamstring and other leg injuries. At home

Three Up

Blue Jays rotation
At week's end Toronto starting pitchers had the second best ERA (3.36) among AL rotations, thanks mostly to rookie lefty Gustavo Chacin: 3–0, 1.42 ERA.

Los Angeles Dodgers
Led by new second baseman Jeff Kent's .415 average and 13 RBIs, L.A. was off to its best start (9–2) since 1981.

Rich Harden, RHP, A's
Emerging as the ace of a revamped staff, the 23-year-old had a 0.68 ERA in two starts.

Three Down

Rockies rotation
One reason why Colorado was off to its worst start (2–9) in franchise history: The starting pitchers had a 6.86 ERA.

Kevin Brown, RHP, Yankees
In his first game since getting shelled in Game 7 of the ALCS, the vet with the balky back was rocked again, 8–4, by Baltimore.

David Bell, 3B, Phillies
Hitless in five straight games last week, Bell slumped to .174 (8 for 46) with one extra-base hit and nine strikeouts.

CHUCK SOLOMON; DAVID BERGMAN (INSET); CHRIS BERNACCHI/SPORTPICS (RANDOLPH)

in the Dominican Republic in the off-season, he followed an intense daily training regimen that included lunges and step exercises to strengthen his legs. "Last year was very difficult," says Reyes. "I cried almost every day when I was hurt. It's great to be back. My legs feel stronger than ever."

By winning six straight after the team's worst start in 42 years, the Mets sent a message to the rest of the National League that they are in the pennant race for the long haul. "Overall, they can be a dangerous team," says an NL general manager. "You've always got a chance with a guy like [Martinez], and their lineup can score enough runs. If they straighten out the bullpen [which had blown three saves through Sunday], there's no reason why they shouldn't be in the hunt all year."

ORIOLE BRIAN ROBERTS

Unexpected Pop At the Top

Baltimore is loaded with high-profile sluggers, but in the club's surprising 8–4 start no one provided more power than its 5' 9", 180-pound leadoff hitter, second baseman Brian Roberts. Last Saturday, Roberts, who hit four homers in 159 games in 2004 and had the American League's sixth-lowest home run rate (one per 160.3 at bats), smacked his fifth dinger in 11 games—a three-run, game-winning blast that gave the Orioles a 7–6 victory over the Yankees. "I haven't seen anybody as hot as him in a very long time," said New York manager Joe Torre. The next day Roberts went 2 for 4, raising his league-leading average to .449, as Baltimore beat the Yankees for the fifth time in six games, 8–4.

LITTLE MAN, BIG STICK In a lineup full of sluggers, the 5' 9" Roberts leads with five homers.

First called up by the Orioles in 2001, the 27-year-old Roberts spent the early part of his career fighting close friend and fellow second baseman Jerry Hairston Jr. for at bats. But when Hairston started '04 on the disabled list with a broken finger and then broke his ankle in August, Roberts got his chance to be a regular and hit .273. Roberts became the undisputed second baseman in February, when Hairston was traded to the Cubs as part of the deal that brought Sammy Sosa to Baltimore.

This season the speedy Roberts has been an effective table setter for number 3 hitter Miguel Tejada and cleanup man Sosa—Roberts had a .534 OBP and 15 runs scored, and was 6 for 7 in stolen base attempts—as well as a dangerous run producer. In addition to leading the AL in hitting, Roberts also topped the league in slugging percentage (.898) and hits (22).

A star at two colleges, North Carolina and South Carolina, Roberts has overcome not only his size but also a congenital heart defect that often left him exhausted as a child. (He has been healthy since having surgery at age five.) "He's a strong little guy—don't let the size fool you," Orioles manager Lee Mazzilli says. "He picks his spots, looks for a certain pitch and just puts the bat on the ball."

As for the sudden flurry of home runs—last seen from a Baltimore leadoff man in 1996, when bulked up centerfielder Brady Anderson jumped from 16 homers in '95 to 50—Roberts doesn't have an explanation for the dramatic increase in long balls. "I have no idea," he said. "I'm the same person I've always been. It's something that won't last, I'm sure. But crazy things happen in this game every year." □

Tom Verducci's View

WELCOME RESTRAINT

In a sports world emotionally charged by recent player-fan incidents involving the Indiana Pacers' Ron Artest and the Texas Rangers' **Frank Francisco**, all of us should take a cue from Yankees rightfielder **Gary Sheffield** (left) and show a little restraint—as he did last Thursday night after being hit by a fan at Fenway Park. Yes, Sheffield instinctively pushed the spectator after the fan brushed him in the mouth while interfering with a ball hit down the rightfield line. But Sheffield understood the cardinal rule for athletes reacting to fan behavior: Never venture into the stands. He kept an unfortunate incident from becoming an ugly event.

At week's end the commissioner's office was still investigating the matter, though Sheffield need not be disciplined. What bears closer watching is the trend of fans wanting more and more to become a part of the action, rather than simply being spectators.

WORTH WAITING FOR

Righthander **Denny Bautista** (right) has been traded twice, which is odd for someone who is 24, throws 98 mph and has a wicked changeup. In August 2003 the Marlins shipped him to Baltimore to get first baseman **Jeff Conine** for their world championship drive. Last June the Orioles sent him to Kansas City to get journeyman reliever **Jason Grimsley**, though Baltimore was nine games under .500 at the time. Raw and sometimes wild, the 6' 5" Bautista (1–1, 5.56 ERA through Sunday) should stick with the Royals, who can afford his growing pains. Meanwhile, scouts and opposing hitters are marveling at his pure stuff. "That kid's going to be a big winner," says Seattle second baseman **Bret Boone**.

ORGANIZATION MAN

The Giants' **Noah Lowry** (left) is the sixth pitcher since '69 to win his first seven career decisions. That's not the only reason he's a rare breed: Lowry is a homegrown lefty starter. After two weeks of the season only five lefties who were still with the team that originally signed them had a win: Lowry, Toronto's **Gustavo Chacin**, the White Sox' **Mark Buehrle**, the Pirates' **Dave Williams** and the Braves' **Horacia Ramirez**.

THREE STRIKES

1. So much for the "punishment" of being outed for steroid use. The Yankees' **Jason Giambi** returned to cheers in New York and the Devil Rays' **Alex Sanchez** to fan indifference in Tampa Bay.
2. Lefthander **Mark Mulder** has picked up where he left off last year, when he looked tired down the stretch. In his past 19 starts with Oakland and now St. Louis, Mulder had a 6.29 ERA.
3. Marlins manager **Jack McKeon** may be old school, but he's not overtaxing his starting pitchers by allowing them to throw five complete games in their first 12 starts. Never did they exceed 114 pitches in those outings.

RAY STUBBLEBINE/REUTERS (ROBERTS); JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (SHEFFIELD); CHRIS CARLSON (BAUTISTA); BEN MARGOT/AP (LOWRY)

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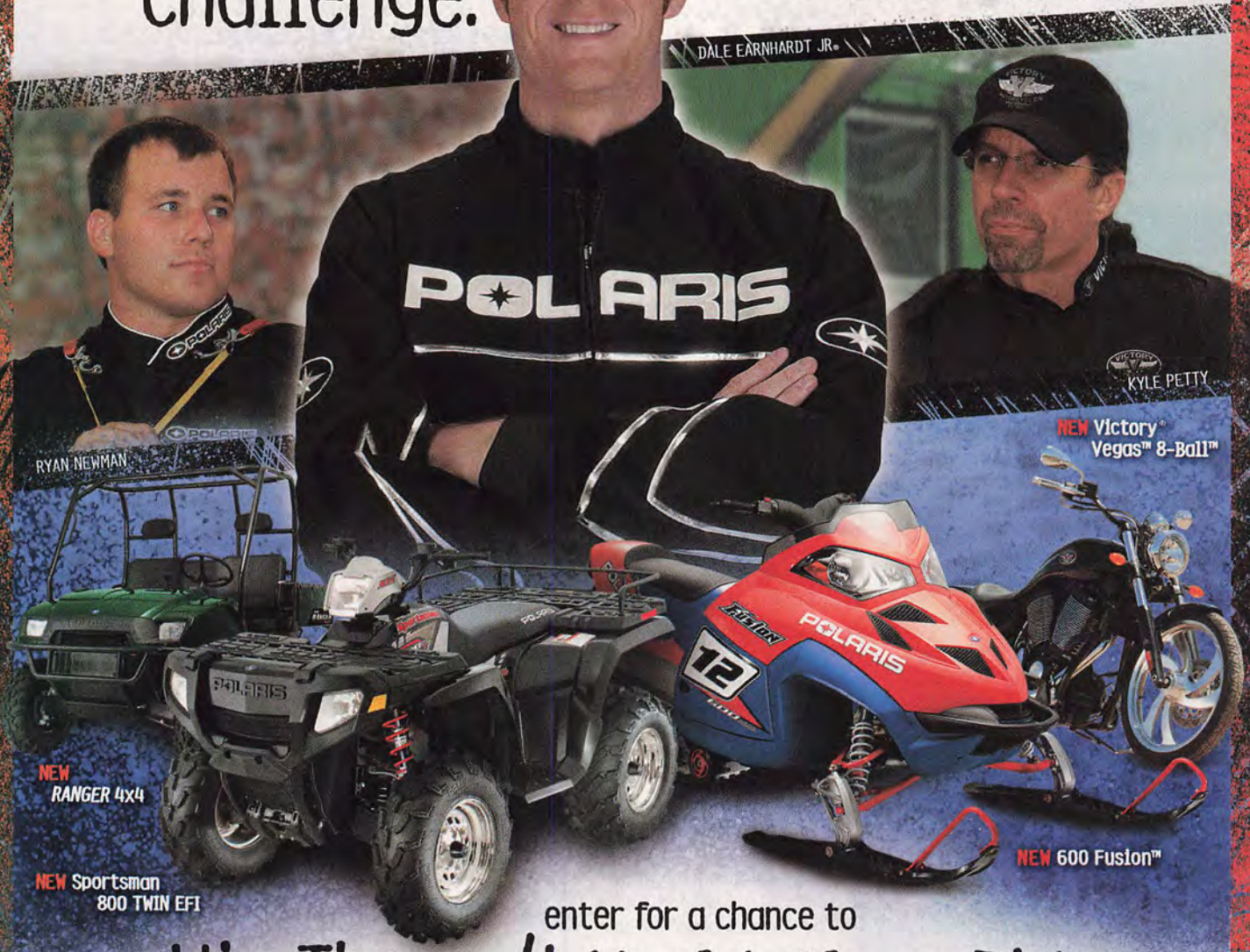

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by Tim Layden

STATEMENT Bandini, with John Velazquez aboard, dominated a strong field at Keeneland.

Track Meet

Todd Pletcher and Nick Zito took different routes to the Derby, but both will arrive with strong contenders

NICK ZITO is overdue to win the Kentucky Derby again. Todd Pletcher is overdue to win his first Derby. So it is only appropriate that both trainers will saddle live contenders at Churchill Downs on May 7. Zito has twice won the most important horse race in America but has been chasing number 3 for more than a decade. Pletcher has been the hottest trainer in the country for three years but is winless with nine Derby starters, dating back to 2000.

Their paths to Louisville could not have been more different. Pletcher nominated 34 3-year-olds for the Triple Crown, more than twice as many as any other trainer. Yet when the sun rose last Saturday, Pletcher had no guaranteed Derby starter, no horse that had done enough on the racetrack (or earned enough money) to qualify. By the time the sun had set, he had two.

In front of a record crowd of 33,261 at Keeneland Race Course in Lexington, Ky., Pletcher's Bandini won the Blue Grass Stakes—against the deepest field in any Derby prep race—by a commanding six lengths. "I was cautiously optimistic that this could happen," Pletcher said afterward. "We had a little hiccup with this horse [he missed the Florida Derby with a bruised foot], but we're fortunate that it was five weeks out from the Derby." Half an hour later his Flower Alley finished second, eight lengths behind the impressive Afleet Alex in the Arkansas Derby but close enough to warrant a Derby start.

RIDING HIGH Afleet Alex gave Jeremy Rose reason to celebrate.

"I'm probably guilty of overnominating horses," says Pletcher. "But you would hate to make a mistake and leave out a horse who develops late." This is a fair point: It cost only $600 to nominate a three-year-old early (this year, by Jan. 22). From Jan. 23 to March 26 the price rose to $6,000, and after March 23 it cost $200,000 to supplement a horse to the Derby. B. Wayne Hughes, owner of Illinois Derby winner Greeley's Galaxy, paid the $200,000, but Greeley's Galaxy, though 14th in stakes earnings, will make the Derby field only if fewer than 20 early nominees enter.

Pletcher, 37, remains unhurried in his quest to win a Derby. "You're dealing with living, breathing creatures and working on a calendar that you can't alter," he says. "You just have to hope the racing gods are in your favor."

The racing gods have been extraordinarily kind to Zito this year. A remarkable five of the 14 horses he nominated will probably start in the Derby, including Bellamy Road, whose 17½-length win in the Wood on April 9 is likely to make him the favorite. Florida Derby winner High Fly, who beat Bandini in the Fountain of Youth on March 5, will also be a popular betting choice. "This race, that race, it's a streak; things are going great," says Zito, who won the Derby with Strike the Gold in 1991 and Go for Gin in '94. Only D. Wayne Lukas, in '96, has had five starters in a Derby; he won with Grindstone.

It is a measure of Zito's remarkable spring that last weekend's results, while perfectly respectable, were the trainer's worst of the spring. Sun King, who had won the Tampa Bay Derby, finished fourth as one of the favorites in the Blue Grass, and Andromeda's Hero was third in the Arkansas Derby. Zito said that both will go to Churchill Downs.

Zito will be a daily media attraction in Louisville. "I've got to find a way not to get sidetracked," he says. "A race like the Derby, you make a mistake training these horses, these other guys will make you pay for it." □

Derby Picks

FOUR FAVORITES

Bellamy Road: His run in the Wood Memorial was beyond scary. And trainer Nick Zito says it took nothing out of him. Odds: even

High Fly: According to rival trainer Bob Baffert, this "tough little horse" was better than Bandini in March. Odds: 3–1

Afleet Alex: The Arkansas Derby prep route was good enough for Smarty Jones last year, good enough for Alex this year. Odds: 7–2

Bandini: Beat a good field in the Blue Grass, but he was the only contender who needed to win. Odds: 9–2

LONG SHOT

Rockport Harbor: Sick and injured much of the prep season, this immensely talented colt needs to get back on track in this Saturday's Lexington Stakes. Odds: 15–1.

BILL FRAKES (BANDINI); DANNY JOHNSTON/AP

Monkeying Around

by Rick Reilly

THE MOST popular Phoenix Sun puts his reputation on the line every night. But it's dry now, so he takes the gorilla suit down and stuffs it in his bag with three others. In 17 years—through busted ankles, shoulders and wrists, and hernias—he's missed only three Suns home games. Fat chance his aching back is going to stop him from showing up at America West Arena tonight.

3:15 p.m. Bob Woolf, a 40-year-old, blue-eyed father of three, is the Gorilla, the King Kong of sports mascots. He was the first NBA mascot to dunk off a mini trampoline, first to dunk through a ring of fire, first to ride a Harley on the court, first to use videotaped skits, first to dunk off a crumbling model of the Empire State Building and first to dunk after being propelled from the three-point line by catapult.

Yet the 5' 9", 170-pound former Arizona State gymnast will practice tonight's dunks, skits and gags for the next 90 minutes. He's got to stay sharp, just like a player. "Except," he says, "there's no injured reserve for gorillas."

6:15 p.m. Before the game between Phoenix and the New Orleans Hornets, an appearance in former Suns owner Jerry Colangelo's box bombs. The suite's full of suits, and they're not laughing at anything—not even the *yank out some gorilla hair and sprinkle it on the bald guy's head* gag. "It's at times like this you go, What in the world am I doing with my life?" Woolf says.

6:40 p.m. Our favorite primate evolved from Ray and Margaret Woolf, who are in the stands. When Bob beat out 500 others to become the Gorilla in 1988, they were mortified. "Four years of college for this?" his dad said. But now, when others brag on their doctor and lawyer sons, Margaret beams, "My boy grew up to be the Gorilla!"

7 p.m. Game time, and the Gorilla is on three-foot stilts, holding a sign: GET ON YOUR FEET! But the lights go out for player introductions, and he nearly trips over a cable he can't see in the tunnel. Over the next four quarters he'll change into eight different outfits and use dozens of props, most of which he's made at home, in his "gorilla room." He's selling the house, though. "So we lock that door for showings," he says. What? You never heard of: *4 bdr, 2 bth, 1 grla*?

7:48 p.m. The Gorilla pulls a gag in the stands with a stooge pretending to be an obnoxious Hornets fan. The payoff is the Gorilla pouring a beer down the guy's pants. Gets a huge laugh. Just like the time he came out in Pampers to mock a whiny player. And the time he was delivering a free "TV" to a lucky fan and dropped it all the way down the stairs. And the time (on tape) he lured a blindfolded "Knicks fan" down the tunnel, out of the arena and into a dumpster, which was promptly hauled away.

8:11 p.m. Sweating like a used-car dealer on *60 Minutes*, Woolf changes into a Rollerblading pizza-delivery gorilla and heads onto the court during a timeout. I'm crouched behind some seats under the basket. I feel something clunk my foot and see the Gorilla sprawled on the floor.

Oh . . . my . . . god! I've tripped the Gorilla in front of 17,616 people! Slowly he turns his head toward me, and his costume face is mashed in. A 10-year-old boy nearby is laughing hysterically. "Bob!" I say. "I'm so sorry."

He winks at me. It's a setup, a con, a pratfall. "Gotcha," he says later.

May his bananas get worms.

8:25 p.m. The Gorilla struts onto the floor in a bright purple zoot suit, carrying a smoking guitar case, to the theme music of *The Godfather*. What's in there? His T-shirt gun, of course, and he begins firing madly at the crowd.

> Bob Woolf is the Gorilla, the King Kong of sports mascots—dunking, flipping and starting popcorn fights.

Says Suns guard Joe Johnson, who's supposed to be paying attention in the huddle, "I'm always trying to see what the joke is, so I miss the play that's called and I've got to ask a teammate."

Good choice, Joe. The skit was better than the play.

9:03 p.m. The Suns are losing to the lowly Hornets, even though the Phoenix players are paid roughly the equivalent of the federal budget. Woolf pulls in between $150,000 and $200,000 a year, but monkey business ain't easy. On off days he makes as many as four appearances. And he doesn't get a dime extra for the playoffs, which could last six weeks for him this year. "I think it's a contract he, uh, regrets," says his assistant, Paul Smith. Uh, I'll bet.

9:20 p.m. The Suns win by 14, though, as usual, the Gorilla hardly saw any of it. He was too busy dancing, dunking, flipping and starting popcorn fights. Oh, and sweating off seven pounds.

10:30 p.m. Woolf makes his way home, ready for another night of laundry until 2 a.m., followed by an early wake-up call to work a Suns charity golf tournament. Maybe he's asking, What in the world am I doing with my life? a lot lately.

The answer? You're doing something wonderful, Bob. You're making people laugh. Who else is doing that?

Besides the Lakers, of course. □

If you have a comment for Rick Reilly, send it to **reilly@siletters.com.**

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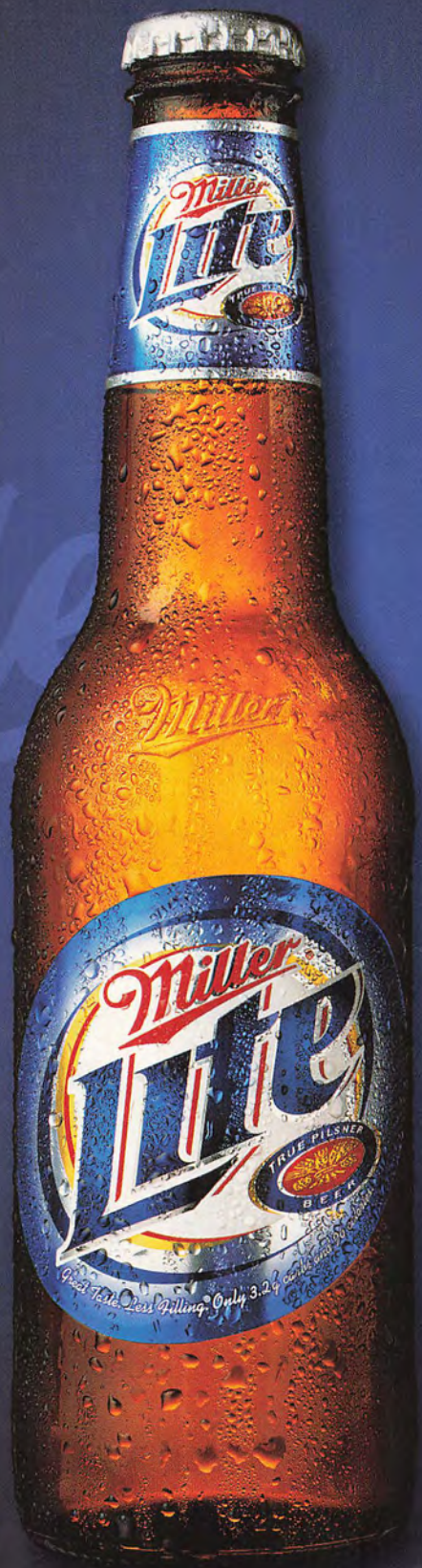

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